SAROJINI NAIDU

K. A. ABBAS

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SAROJINI NAIDU

An Introduction to a Fascinating Personality

By

KHAWJA AHMAD ABBAS

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O Fate, betwixt the grinding-stones of pain,
Tho' you have crushed my life like broken grain,
Lo! I will leaven it with my tears and knead
The bread of Hope to comfort and to feed
The myriad hearts for whom no harvests blow
Save bitter herbs of woe.

Tho' in the flame of Sorrow you have thrust
My flowering soul and trod it into dust,
Behold, it doth reblossom like a grove
To shelter under quickening boughs of Love
The myriad souls for whom no garden bloom
Save bitter buds of doom.

— "INVINCIBLE" By Sarojini Naidu

INTRODUCTION

I undertook the "Assignment Sarojini Naidu" with great pleasure, but it was entrusted to me too late. There were hardly six weeks to August 15, when the manuscript was required by the Committee.

Anyhow, I took up the work as a 'labour of love'—as a part of the debt I owed to the late Sarojini Naidu for all she did for me—and for the Indian nation.

I was helped to complete the work in time, mainly because of two admirable biographical works—Padmini Sengupta's definitive biography of Sarojini Naidu, which is the last word on the subject, and Tara Ali Baig's book in the "Builders of Modern India series" which, though shorter, supplements Mrs. Sengupta's book admirably with her own research, her own experiences of meeting with the subject of her book. In fact, both Mrs. Baig and Mrs. Sengupta were fortunate to have known Sarojini Naidu personally and met her repeatedly. Naturally, it has given their work a particular perception and perspective. I myself had only a reporter's encounters with this leader of the Congress, as I had with others, and two meetings of a personal nature, the last of which is described in some detail in the chapter on her Governorship of U. P.

I am grateful to all those who talked to me, or wrote to me sharing their opinion and assessment of Sarojini Naidu, specially Shri Sadiq Ali, Governor of Maharashtra, who was the first to respond to my invitation to share with me his views on Sarojini, Mrs. Devika Rani Roerich who wrote from Bangalore, despite her own illness, and Shrimathi Sumati Morarji who contributed her memoirs, despite her preoccupations, and my old friend, Harindranath Chattopadhyay, who gave me a prolonged interview, though he was in bed after a serious operation. To the Nehru Memorial Museum, I am thankful for sending me Xerox copies of her letters to Nehru, which were invaluable source material. I am also grateful to my Secretary Shri Syed Abdul Rehman, who alone could decipher my abominable handwriting and typed the first draft of the manuscript.

Independence Day, 1979. K. A. ABBAS

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1

"NAUGHTY GIRL OF INDIA"

"ON the 65th of this month, we hear you are celebrating your thirteenth birthday !"

This is how I, an irreverent young reporter, wanted to greet Mrs. Sarojini Naidu when she arrived in Bombay in 1944. At the last minute, however, I got funky and said something about *ras-goolas* being in order for such a "sweet" occasion.

Being even more irreverent, and safe behind the protective armour of anonymity, I repeated these words that I could not utter in person. For there was more in these words than an attempt to be funny. Mrs. Naidu was as charming on her 65th birthday, as the sweetest thirteen-year-old And slightly to vary the compliment that Ethel Mannin once paid to Bertrand Russell, one might say that merely to talk to Sarojini Naidu was more fascinating than to make love to almost any other woman. It must be about her that the poet said :

Age cannot wither nor custom stale
Her infinite variety.

Sarojini Naidu was more than a person. She was more than a leader even. She was an institution. She was a landmark of modern India. She was one of the makers of an era in Indian history. The Government ban on her speeches and statements in 1944 showed that even the bureaucrats and the imperialists were not unaware of her importance and her influence.

Patriot, poetess, politician, orator, hostess, jail-bird, heart-breaker and housewife, inspirer of the multitude, maker of rhymes and upholder of reason, dreamer of dreams and the disturber of a nation's sleep, idol of the millions and iconoclast—many and varied roles she had played during the 70 years of her life. She had more than a man's courage and yet she was feminine to the core; she could discuss politics, poetry and the pattern of a *sari* with equal facility. Her love of gossip was only next to her love of the freedom of her country. She was a heroine. And yet she was intensely human.

She loved to tell stories about people, including herself even against herself !

She would tell you, for instance, how (many years ago) she was once introduced by the sedate Chairman of a meeting (if I remember right, in South Africa) as the 'Naughty Girl of India'—trying to pronounce, of course, the 'Nightingale of India'.

The title 'Nightingale of India' (or *Bulbul-e-Hind*) had adorned her from the days of her youth when her poetry had revealed to the world the beauty and rhythm of Indian life, as also the yearnings and aspirations of the Indian people.

Not only her poetry but also her prose showed the remarkable extent to which she had mastered Urdu and the English language. When she went abroad, they were amazed at her power of eloquence. When she spoke, it was like music—now soothing, now sweet, now inspiring, now rising to a crescendo in an angry denunciation of the ungodly and the unjust.

Next only to her eloquence came her remarkable sense of humour. In her company there was never a dull moment. Her sparkling conversation was guaranteed to chase the bluest of 'blues' away, and she had the uncanny sixth sense of the perfect hostess to know how to put each one of her guests—whether a celebrity or a young student—at ease. When she used to live in Bombay, her suite at the Taj was the meeting ground of all nations of the world, where at one and the same time one could meet American journalists, European authors and artists, Indian Nawabs and Maharajas, political leaders, Socialists, Communists, Trade Union workers, students, film stars, musicians. In the midst of this remarkable conglomeration, she held court — a Queen, indeed, crowned by her own glory and adorned by the jewel of her wit!

But every now and then the 'Nightingale of India' would be shut up in a cage—whenever the path of patriotism led prisonwards! But even in jail she never lost her sense of humour and her love of life, and her company was the delight of all her fellow-prisoners. Since August 9, 1942, she had been kept in detention at the Aga Khan's bungalow in Poona along with Gandhiji and Kasturba, and it is well known that it was she who all along ran that establishment. When Gandhiji undertook his epic fast, she nursed and served him with the devotion of a sister or a daughter. Of all the Congress leaders, she was the only one who dared exchange pleasantries with Gandhiji and talk to him with affectionate 'disrespect'. Only she could take the liberty of nicknaming him, 'Our Mickey Mouse of India!' Not even the Mahatma was safe when shafts of her wit were flying around. She once told Jawaharlal Nehru: "Jawahar, don't think all these young women who come to hear your speeches are converts to Socialism. They only want to look at your handsome face."

Mrs. Naidu once called Mr. Jinnah 'the Ambassador of Hindu-Muslim Unity.' Those were the days when the tall young lawyer was foremost in the ranks of the fighters for unity and freedom. But there is no doubt that in her own life and outlook, Mrs. Naidu has herself proved the most striking symbol of Hindu-Muslim Unity. In her, the two streams of culture have met—as they have met in the cultural synthesis of her country.

Not by accident but by deliberate choice, she had assimilated all that was best in the two religions and their philosophies and literatures, allowing no prejudice to bar the doors of her home or the doors of her mind and heart. Before me lies a copy of the collection of her poems, *The Sceptred Flute*, and I find in it such poems as 'Humayun to Zubeida', 'Song of Zeb-un-Nissa', 'Royal Tombs of Golconda', 'A Persian Love Song,' 'The Imam Bara' and 'The Prayer of Islam', along with 'Damayanti to Nala', 'To a Buddha', 'A Rajput Love Song', 'The Temple' and 'Kali the Mother.' This universality of poetic interest is only symbolic of her sterling nationalism, which is unsullied by the slightest trace of religious bigotry or communalism. No wonder she retained the friendship and trust of even the staunchest Muslim Leaguers.

She was essentially a poet, but the freedom movement pulled her out of her ivory tower and landed her in the hurly-burly of political life. And yet she had retained her poetic vision and her womanly grace and, to a large extent, succeeded in softening and mellowing the political atmosphere by the charm of her personality. She had influenced several generations of Indians, given an impetus to the movement for women's emancipation, and her speeches had inspired many an idealistic youth to throw himself into the struggle for freedom.

Her political career was a part of the history of modern India. But it was not generally known that she had often served as a sort of 'roving ambassador' of the Indian nation. She once styled herself 'a wandering poet.' But the wandering she had done, had been in the cause of her country's freedom.

In 1924, she toured throughout the colonies of East and South Africa on a political mission on behalf of the Indian settlers. When she was in South Africa, General Hertzog enquired why her countrymen did not repatriate to their native land. She retorted : "I might as well ask why you Hollanders in South Africa don't return to the Netherlands?"

During her visit to London to attend the Round Table Conference, she addressed a large number of meetings on India's demand for independence. From England, she went to America on a lecture tour and charmed the entire continent by her eloquent advocacy of India's cause and did much to counteract the vicious poison spread by Katherine Mayo's infamous book *Mother India*. Referring to this trip, she had said :

> "The moment my boat arrived, I was set upon by the live-wire American reporters, who all screamed at me: what do you think of Katherine Mayo?" I replied

"Katherine Mayo? Who is she? I think that was her fittest epitaph!"

The Indian nation set the seal upon Sarojini Naidu's charter of fame when she was elected President of the Indian National Congress in 1925. It was a historic session over which she presided, as it was at Kanpur that the Congress came out with a direct challenge to Imperialism. Since then she had been in the forefront of the political struggle and an indispensable member of the councils of the nation's leadership, right up to her death in 1949, when she was Governor of Uttar Pradesh.

It was only in India that a woman could hold such a position. In no so-called emancipated country of the West could a Sarojini Naidu rise to the highest position in the political leadership. It was inconceivable that a woman will ever become the President of the United States of America, or President of the Presidium of U. S. S. R.

In my opinion, Mrs. Sarojini Naidu was the greatest woman of her age. Compare her with all the other prominent women of the world—and you have to concede her to be the greatest of them all. Mrs. Roosevelt, Madame Chiang Kai-shek, Madame Sun Yat-sen, even Mrs. Bandaranaike —each of these undoubtedly great women owed her eminent position, in a large measure, to the lofty status of her husband. In the Soviet Union while many women have contributed to the success of the Revolution and the reconstruction, and have helped to win the war against the Nazis, yet none of them has individually distinguished herself in the same decisive manner as Lenin or Stalin or Kalinin or Molotov. But Sarojini Naidu had shown to the world that a woman could, by sheer dint of her own ability and personality and without in the least basking in the reflected glory of her husband, rise to the highest position in her country.

This was as much a tribute to Mrs. Naidu personally as to the liberating and constructive forces released by the freedom movement in India, led by Gandhiji. It is only against this flaming background of struggle and service and sacrifice that the heroic figure of Sarojini Naidu can be seen in its correct perspective. For that was what made a mere 'poetess' and charming society hostess into a Woman of Destiny who helped to change the destiny of her country and her people, specially of the Indian women !

2

HEREDITY AND ENVIRONMENT

THE old controversy between Heredity and Environment as the determining factor in a person's character and destiny is unresolved in the case of Sarojini, born Chattopadhyay and later known to the world as Sarojini Naidu. For, her parents, the providers of Heredity, also provided the environment in which she grew up.

Her father was, undoubtedly, the senior partner of the heredity team. He was a character—quaint, intelligent, versatile, adventurous, generous—the like of which is seldom met outside the pages of fiction. Born amidst the rivers and estuaries and the jungles of East Bengal, Aghorenath Chattopadhyay was like a character out of the stories and novels of Sarat Chandra Chatterji. But actually, he is supposed to be the original of a character in Rabindranath Tagore's *Kshudhita Pashan* (*Hungry Stones*). He is the legendary "Man in Train" whom the poet-novelist had actually met in a train and who, in a railway station waiting room, told the author the macabre story of *Hungry Stones* which the author could not decide was a fact or spun out of the imagination of the Man in Train. In the film based on this story made by Tapan Sinha, the narrator's mysterious character was played by Robi Mohan Bhattacharya, the veteran Bengali intellectual and actor, who lends it the mysterious dimension of half-truth and half-fable.

That character, according to Rabindranath Tagore himself, was based on Aghorenath Chattopadhyay who related "strange happenings of science with quotations from the Vedas and Persian poetry so fluently………"

Sarojini Naidu described her father in these words: "My ancestors for thousands of years have been lovers of the forest and mountain caves, great dreamers, great scholars, great ascetics. My father is a dreamer himself, a great dreamer, a great man whose life has been a magnificent failure……"

It was on the Brahmaputra estuary in East Bengal that Aghorenath, aged fourteen, saw a girl of nine in a boat drifting in the river. She was, as her youngest son Harindranath later described her, "half-angel, half-bird" and Aghorenath immediately fell in love with her.

Aghorenath, even at that young age, had strange friends. Some of them were, frankly, *dakoos* and, though he never had an inclination (nor the need) to become one of them, he was fascinated by their daring and adventurous life. To them he confessed his love, and they helped him to meet his childhood-sweetheart. Soon he was married—which was not strange in the society of those days, as child marriages were the order of the day, but they were not consummated at that early age—actually it was a kind of engagement. It is interesting to note that, in later life, when he was fully grown-up and matured, and became a social reformer, he was firmly opposed to child marriages, and even disapproved of his own eldest daughter's marriage when she, a girl of barely fourteen, fell in love with a young doctor who was a non-Brahmin. But, though a Brahmin himself by birth, Aghorenath had long since discarded his sacred thread; he was a kind of agnostic, he no longer believed in caste distinctions and, in his house there were no taboos observed and the family mixed with Muslims and Hindus of non-Brahmin origin, even untouchables. But he had become opposed to early marriage.

To go back to Aghorenath Chattopadhyay's early life; he migrated from East Bengal to come to Calcutta's cosmopolitan city, where a poor student like him had to read borrowed books in the light of street lamps. But his natural brilliance shone through his threadbare costume and soon he showed his mettle in studies. He was brilliant in both English, Bengali and Sanskrit, besides which he had acquired proficiency in Greek, Hebrew, French, German and Russian. But his main interest was in the study of Science—specially Chemistry.

His early passion for Social Reform led him to form a band of young men from his own *Kulin* Brahmin sub-caste — to do something to reform the unjust caste laws according to which young girls were "sold" to very old men. Many were the *Kulin* girls who were "saved" or "kidnapped" by this group. The girls were brought to be educated and trained at "The Banga Mahila Vidyalaya"—the first college for girls established in India. The young reformers were ostracised by their caste elders, and even accused of "kidnapping" *Kulin* girls—and, thereafter, they took refuge in the Brahmo Samaj, founded by Raja Ram Mohan Roy and then under the leadership of Keshab Chandra Sen.

Meanwhile, through the interest taken in the young scholar by Brahmo Samaj which had friendly relations with the British Establishment, young Aghorenath was offered the Gilchrist Scholarship for higher studies in England, leaving his young wife, Varada Sundari, in the "Bharat Ashram" run by Keshab Chandra Sen where she received education as well as training to be a housewife.

While in England, Aghorenath won two more scholarships, and eventually took the degree of D.Sc. — the first Indian to become a Doctor of Science. Soon he forsook Edinburgh in 1877, and, on another scholarship, went for further studies at the Bonn University in Germany.

Back in India, with academic honours and a wonderful reputation as a young and brilliant scientist, he came face to face with the realities of the Indian situation. There were no great laboratories available to carry on research in Chemistry—for which he was educated and trained abroad. In Bengal there was no research institute, no laboratory, not even a chance to teach in a college or a university. He was an encyclopaedist before his time—before Jagdish Chandra Bose who was to come much later.

An offer came to him as a school teacher from far away Hyderabad, a princely State in the Deccan, where he established a school with English as the medium of instruction. Here he took his wife, already a young Bengali poetess and singer, who, raised in the tradition of liberal Bengal, found herself in an entirely different cultural milieu, which was an amalgam of the Mughal *darbari tehzeeb* and South Indian Brahminic culture. Though the medium of instruction in his school was English, the court and official language of Hyderadad was Deccani Urdu, which Aghorenath the linguist, soon mastered and would speak with great aplomb.

There was a group called *Ikhwan-us-Sufa* (The Brotherhood of Truth) to which all radical intellectuals of Hyderabad—Hindu and Muslim — were admitted. The contemplation of Social Reform soon turned to practical interest in politics. The Indian National Congress was formed in Bombay in 1885, and Dr. Aghorenath threw himself in the *Swadeshi* movement, heart and soul, despite advice to the contrary from his elders including Acharya Prafulla Chandra Roy. There is no doubt that his scientific research suffered because of Dr. Aghorenath's passionate interest in politics. But what was lost to science was a gain to the national cause. For, together with his beautiful wife, Aghorenath "invented" the human being called Sarojini and infused in her the patriotic and poetic spirit which would flower and mature into one of the most effective and fascinating weapons to be used for the cause of the people and the nation.

Sarojini was born in Hyderadad on 13th February, 1879, and her birth filled "the house with joy"—as it would, later, fill the whole country and the whole world with the joy of life.

What was the environment into which the pretty child was born ?

It was in a house on Nizam Shahi Road in Hyderabad that she spent the earliest years of her life. It was not an affluent household by any means—it was filled not with material possessions like costly furniture, Persian carpets, tapestries or costly and rare China, but with things of the spirit like a scientist's and a humanist's collection of books and a poetess singer's voice raised in *bhajans* and Bengali lyrical poems and the love of both the parents which was warm like sunshine but never indulgent and overpowering.

Before she could speak, the baby heard voices—Vedic hymns and Persian Sufistic poetry recited by her father, the *bhajans* and Bengali lyrical poetry, discussions in Bengali and Urdu on philosophical, political and social or scientific matters.

Also she heard other babies crying, who soon grew up into lusty children's voices. Her parents were creative in the sense of fecundity also—one after another a series of children were born — brothers and sisters to Sarojini; Harinda (the only surviving child of Aghorenath (aged 81 today) gives a whole list of the brothers and sisters who all grew up sharing the revolutionary zeal and intellectual genius of their father and sensitive temperament of their mother; Virendra who was to go to Europe as a young man of 21 and never to return to a "slave India", became a Communist intellectual, lived in Germany and spent the last years of his life in Stalin's Russia where he died in the Nineteen-Forties; Mrinalini took the father's career as an educationist and became the Principal of a college in faraway Lahore; Bhupendranath who became Assistant Accountant-General of Hyderadad; Sunalini who became a renowned dancer; Ranendranath who grew up into a Mathematical whiz and, last but the most versatile of all, Harindranath Chattopadhyay who was to be a great play-wright, a great dancer, a great musician, a great singer whose national songs stirred several generations of the nation's youth. The youngest of them was Suhasini who became a Communist and married a Communist leader, besides being an educationist. But all this was to be in the future. For the time being the eldest of them is just born, exercising her faculty of breathing.

She breathed the peculiar fragrance of old books which filled the house, even the room where the new-born baby's crib was placed, and the sweetest of this fragrance came from poetry books—poetry written in Persian, Urdu, Bengali and English—which smothered the pungent odours of chemicals and the musty smells which emanated from dog-eared books of Science and Mathematics.

3

A POET IN LOVE

IN her Old Hyderabad house, the little girl of eleven was trying to solve a problem in Algebra. She had been going to school for two years now, as her father, encouraging her precocity, was seriously bent on developing her talents as a mathematician or a scientist. For that Algebra was essential. She knew this. Yet on that spring day in Hyderabad the Algebra problem would not (or could not) be solved. Instead, a kind of spiritual unrest grew within her—a feeling of discontent with Algebra, a bursting forth of the poet's fancy and feelings. Lines of verses—her own verses—kept on coming to her on their own. She tried to dismiss them as the idle yearnings of maidenhood, and concentrated on the problem of Algebra which would enable her to fulfil the destiny of a woman scientist that her father had chosen for her.

He wanted her to be the first lady scientist of India! But the Muse is a persistent visitor—she would not go away so easily! Her instinct of self-expression won against the shades of Euclid and Aryabhatta. She put aside the Algebra problem and, using the same pencil and the pages of the same Algebra exercise book, she wrote in it the lines of the first poem of hers.

The heredity and environment were working overtime in turning her face to the Muse of Poetry. For both her father and mother were essentially poets, though her father was also an educationist, a scientist and a philosopher.

His interests and fields of knowledge were encyclopaedic but, somehow, his daughter—Sarojini—plucked the red rose of poetry from her father's versatile garden of genius.

Let her tell in her own words her early career as a precocious child-poetess :

> "From that day my 'poetic career' began. At twelve I wrote a long poem *a la* 'Lady of the Lake'—1,300 lines in six days. At thirteen, I wrote a (poetic) drama of 2,000 lines, a full-fledged passionate thing that I began on the spur of the moment without forethought, just to spite my doctor. My health broke down permanently about this time, and my regular studies being stopped I read voraciously. I suppose the greater part of my reading was done between fourteen and sixteen. I wrote a novel, I wrote volumes, I took myself very seriously in those days."

How seriously is evident by an entry in her schoolgirlish diary : "What have I done today to change the world ?"

But her father had specific plans. Before she could change the world, she had to pass her Matriculation examination. At the impossible age of twelve, she was sent to Madras where she appeared for her examination. Sarojini's syllabus consisted of English, Science, History, Geography and Mathematics. In 1891, the standard of Madras University was very high, indeed. Some of the questions were of the B.A. standard of today. Yet, she not only got First Class but stood First in the whole Presidency which gave her the first taste of fame.

But the strain of the examination told on her health which broke down completely.

Meanwhile, a young doctor had arrived in Hyderabad, straight after his studies in Edinburgh. He was inevitably drawn to the house of Dr. Aghorenath Chattopadhyay, though he was a Telugu-speaking non-Brahmin. But in the cosmopolitan household, he fitted perfectly. And weren't both the doctors—the Doctor of Science and the Doctor of Medicine—from the same Edinburgh University? Naturally they had many things in common to talk about the Edinburgh University. Since he became a regular visitor, inevitably he was invited to examine the child prodigy, her big black eyes sparkling and seemingly popping out of her emaciated frame.

Between Dr. Muthyala Govindarajulu Naidu and his much-younger patient, Sarojini, love was a foregone conclusion. But Aghorenath was shocked, for he was a reformer who was opposed to girls marrying at an early age. He had forgotten that he was of the same age as Sarojini when he fell in love with her mother when she was a child of nine ! Heredity plays strange tricks in determining the destiny of individuals.

Sarojini, lying on her sick-bed, expressed her love in lyrics which were universal and yet, for Doctor Naidu and to Sarojini, they were personal expressions of what could not be expressed openly.

In *Love's Vision*, she expressed her love unabashedly :

> *"Dear as the memory of the days gone by,*
> *Enchanting as the future's mystery,*
> *Art thou to me."*

In another poem, *How Do I Love Thee* ? she expressed her desperate and defiant emotions :

"I love thee with a love whose faith,
Is changeless as the stars of the night.
My love is stronger far than death,
My love is pure as morning light.
I ask not if thou lovest me,
It is enough to me thou art
The noblest, dearest, best — to thee
I yield the treasures of my heart."

The father and mother were surely alarmed by the infatuation that Sarojini, frail and ill as she was, had developed for Dr. Naidu. According to Aghorenath, she was too young to marry, and he tried to make her forget him by creating a physical distance between the two. He sent her to Sholapur, where she continued to write her love lyrics. When she came back, she had manuscripts of a verse play written in Persian—called *Mehar Muneer* (a legendary romantic couple)—which her father liked very much. He got it printed for limited circulation and a copy of it was sent to the Nizam. Meanwhile, the parents talked among themselves. The mother suggested to send her to Madras, but the father knew that such short distance would be as futile as Sholapur. He wanted to send her to England and put oceans between the two lovers. But he had no money to pay for her passage. The Nizam came to his rescue by offering a scholarship to send her to England for further studies. Perhaps it was a royal reward for her Persian play or perhaps he had—along the palace grape-vine—heard of the girl's hopeless infatuation for Major Naidu who was a military doctor of the Nizam's own troops.

As luck would have it, Mrs. Annie Besant—adopted daughter of Mother India—was to leave for England at about the same time and agreed to chaperon the young poetess about whom she had heard and whom she came to love as a daughter.

Sarojini got admission at King's College, London, and later she went to Girton Girls' College, Cambridge. But the lecture room held no attraction for her romantic, poetic spirit. She felt cramped and cribbed within the four walls of an academic institution. But the beautiful countryside fascinated her and invited her to write poetry about the clouds, the birds and the trees that enraptured her.

In London, she lived at Miss Manning's boarding house, where she met some of the celebrated literary figures with whose names she was already familiar. The captivating beauty of the slim and petite Indian girl draped in rich colourful silk saris, with her remarkably big, beautiful eyes, undoubtedly helped her to attract round her a galaxy of admirers. Among these was the poet Edmund Gosse, who was already well-established as a critic. She also met Heinemann, her future publisher. But the decisive influence was of Arthur Symons, the poet, who developed a platonic love for her. One of her fellow-students took her —and her poetry—to the celebrated critic Edmund Gosse who was greatly impressed by the fluency of her diction but embarrassed by her self-conscious English images. She lacked individuality and national identity. So, with his candid criticism, he brought her back to the colour, the feel, and the mood of India. He wrote to her : "The verses which you entrusted to me were skilful in form, correct in grammar and blameless in sentiment, but they had the disadvantage of being totally without individuality. They were (too) Western in feeling and imagery, they were founded on reminiscences of Tennyson and Shelley………… I laid them down in despair." He was equally candid when he spoke to her personally. He advised her that all her poetry in the "falsely English vein" should be discarded. What was expected of her was "some revelation of the heart of India, some penetrating analysis of native passion of the principles of antique religion and of such mysterious intimations as stirred the soul of the East, long before the West had begun to dream that it had a soul." He wanted her not to sing of English robins and skylarks, but "to set her poems firmly among the mountains, the gardens, the temples—in other words, to be a genuine Indian poet of the Deccan, not a machine-made imitator of the English classics."

Such harsh criticism was hard to take, specially when it was offered to "so young and sensitive" a soul as Sarojini. But she showed great wisdom in accepting it humbly and, in the process, discovered herself to be, indeed, a poet of India. It was not merely, as a poet, but as a patriot, that she came near to her country and to her people as the singer of their songs and the teller of their tales !

She wrote to Gosse : "I do not dare to treat myself to thank you for what you said. You cannot know what these words mean to me. Poetry is the one thing I love so passionately, so intensely, so absolutely that it is my very life of life—and now you have told me that *I am a poet* — I am a poet !" *

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*Letter to Edmund Gosse.

Now that, intellectually, and poetically, she had returned to India, she became home-sick, really sick. She had not made a success of her academic life either in London or Cambridge, but she didn't care. She had found her poetry —and she had re-discovered her country. For her illness, she was sent to Switzerland and then to sunny Italy where she recomposed her health and strength to return to India— and to the man she still loved, above all things in life.

In September, 1898, Sarojini returned to India. She repeated her resolve to marry Dr. Naidu and, when the marriage proposal came from the gallant Major in proper Indian style, her parents relented and agreed.

The Brahmo Samaj Marriage Bill had become an Act in Hyderabad in 1822 and civil marriages between Indians of different castes were permitted. So Sarojini's and Dr. Naidu's was almost the first unorthodox marriage among the Indian elite of that period. The marriage was performed in Madras, according to reformed Brahmo rites in the presence of the great social reformer, Kandukuri Veeresalingam Pantulu. When they returned to Hyderabad, her mother held a reception for her Muslim and Hindu women friends in purdah, when "the singing girls sang a selection of the Nizam's *ghazals*."

Thus Sarojini Chattopadhyay became Sarojini Naidu — the name by which she would be known for the rest of her life.

4

FROM MOTHER TO MOTHER INDIA

SAROJINI, despite her later national fame as a poet and a politician, was an ideal housewife. Doctor Naidu could not have wished for a better wife — or housewife. Living in a rented house, she turned it into an ideal home for herself and her husband — and, later on, for her four children who arrived in quick succession — from 1900 to 1904.

It was not a luxurious house but everything in it spoke of taste and refinement. The drawing room was dominated by a black stone statue of the Buddha on which she wrote one of her deepest philosophical poems.

She welcomed her children into this world in characteristic poet's fashion by writing a poem dedicated to each new arrival. The eldest, Jayasurya, was the "Sun of Victory" who was to be the "Son of Song and Liberty;" Padmaja was "the Lotus Maiden;" Ranadheera was the "Little Lord of Battle" who would be " Lord of Love and Chivalry"; and the youngest, Leilamani, was the "Living Jewel of Delight." All her mother's hopes were enshrined in these poetic words.

The *Adda* of the Bengalis and the *Baithak* of the North Indians, in the case of the Europe-returned Naidus, came to be the *Salon* over which presided Sarojini with her cultured charm which enveloped everyone who came within the four walls — bearded philosophers, long-haired poets, doctor-colleagues of Dr. Naidu, barristers and lawyers, professors and impecunious students. Everyone was welcome, none was turned away, who gravitated to the *Golden Threshold*.

The house was well-named. It was the threshold of golden hospitality and cultured talk. The *Mushairas* (poets' symposiums) would go on far into the night, and at the end always as a mark of distinction, the beautiful hostess would be asked to recite her own verses in English or one of the younger Urdu poets would recite an Urdu translation of the same.

Sarojini's love of animals soon turned the house into a veritable zoo. Harin remembers his sister's fascination for a Persian cat which sat in Sarojini's lap, and four dogs which were given lovely and exotic names befitting a poet's favourites — they were *Ras Taffari, Pavo Nourmi, Nicolo Pissano* and *Dik Dik Mahjong*. For some time there was even a tiger cub in the "zoo." But more characteristic was the flock of caged birds which filled the house with their merry chirping which, in course of time, mingled with children's laughter.

It was a house — pleasant, laughter-filled, creative and cultured in the best sense of the word, the kind of house which a conscientious doctor and his poet-wif woulde be loth to be away from for any length of time.

Yet there were stirrings within Sarojini Naidu, events were happening which would be like a clarion call to battle. For some time her response was that of a poet. In a long prose-poem, *Nilambuja* (which symbolized Sarojini herself) she foresees her future :

"Yes, must I go where the loud world beckons,
And the urgent drum beat of destiny calls,
Far from your white domes luminous slumber,
Far from the dream of your forest walls,
Into the strife of the throng and the tumult
The war of sweet love against folly and wrong..."

Three volumes of her collected poems were out one after another—*The Golden Threshold*, *The Bird of Time* and *The Broken Wing*. Her poem in response to Gokhale's question, "Why should a song-bird like you have a broken wing ?" evoked — or provoked — the following Question and Answer both in verse :

Question :

Life and our land await their destined Spring
Song-bird, why dost thou bear a broken wing ?

Answer :

Shall Spring that wakes mine ancient land again
Call to my wild and suffering heart in vain ?
Or Fate's blind arrows still the pulsing note
Of my far-reaching, frail, unconquered throat ?
Or a weak bleeding pinion daunt or tire
My flight to the high realms of my desire ?
Behold, I rise to meet the destined spring
And scale the stars upon my broken wing !

She was constantly ill during this period—indeed, it is a triumph of her spirit that she was ailing frequently all her life and yet she came to be a foremost politician, travelling in the cause of the nation from one end of the country to the other, became the President of the Indian National Congress, a roving goodwill ambassador of

India to America and Africa, the Chairman of the Asian Relations Conference held in Delhi on the eve of Independence, and ultimately became the Governor of Uttar Pradesh and died in Lucknow at the age 70. Despite the frailty of her constitution and her health, she was ageless, indestructible *Mother India*. The "Ode of India" might as well be addressed to her own self :

> "*Rise, Mother, rise, regenerate from thy gloom,*
> *And like a bride high-mated from the spheres,*
> *Beget new glories from thine ageless womb.*
> *Thy future calls thee with a manifold sound*
> *To crescent honours, splendours, victories vast ;*
> *Waken, O slumbering Mother, and be crowned,*
> *Who once wert Empress of the sovereign past.*"

Intellectually, she was prepared for the Great Transformation. But her first incursion in public life was on the issue of women's emancipation. The women's movement was just beginning in India. And so, she was invited to meetings everywhere as the fame of her oratory spread from one corner of the country to another. Dr. Naidu never once stood in her way — he was himself an ardent advocate of Women's Emancipation, and he practised what he preached. To keep the one woman, with her fiery tongue, who could set the whole country on fire, locked up in a house, would be treachery to the cause. Sarojini went to Madras and then farther away from home to Bombay and Calcutta. She vehemently expressed the cause of women's emancipation, she exhorted them to come out of seclusion and the *purdah*, to work, to take up careers, she reprimanded women for neglecting their duties to their children by not caring for their education and their hygiene. She drew their attention to the miserable existence of orphans and the misery of the physically handicapped. Above all else, she pointed to the need of women's education, for without education there would be no genuine emancipation.

She delivered her speeches in English or Urdu which was like a mother tongue to her, having lived all her life in Urdu-speaking Hyderabad — and her oratory was matchless in both tongues. And Urdu, being virtually Hindustani in its spoken form, was understood everywhere; her fame spread all over the country as a woman of great charm and power of expression. Wherever possible, she spiced her speeches with invective and transparent anecdotes. For instance, at a meeting, she compared the joint family system to "a domestic rat."

She had an oratorical style of her own which was peculiarly suited to India and Indian audiences. Her repetition of words and phrases gave her eloquence an almost poetic and hypnotic quality. Not many speeches of her early period are preserved today.

The earliest example is a speech which she delivered on the theme of National Unity in 1903 (when she was barely 24) in Madras when she said to a students, assembly :

> "Having travelled, having conceived, having hoped, having enlarged my love, having widened my sympathies, having come into contact with different races, different communities, different religions, different civilizations, friends, my vision is clear. I have no prejudice of race, creed, caste or colour...... Until you students have acquired and mastered that spirit of brotherhood, do not believe it possible that you wil

ever cease to be sectarian... if I may use such a word... that you will ever be national ! "

Again, on the same theme in the same city of Madras, she declaimed :

> "I say it is not your pride that you are a Madrasi, it is not your pride that you are a Brahmin, it is not your pride that you belong to South India, it is not your pride that you are a Hindu, but that it is your pride that you are an Indian. But this must transcend even national borders and extend to humanity, because if ideals be only for the prosperity of your country, it would end where it began, by being a prophet to your own community and very probably to your own self."

It is remarkable that this criticism of parochialism, provincialism and regional and religious chauvinism came from a young woman of twenty-four much before the advent of Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru into Indian politics!

These speeches brought her to the attention of the leaders of the Indian National Congress, the most famous of them being Gopal Krishna Gokhale. When he died in 1915, a valedictory tribute appeared in the *Bombay Chronicle,* the nationalist daily of Bombay, under the by line of Mrs. Sarojini Naidu. In the course of this article she recalls :

> "One morning, a little despondent and sick at heart about national affairs in general, Gokhale suddenly asked me, 'What is your outlook for India ?' 'One of hope', I replied. 'What is your vision of the immediate future ?' ' Hindu-Muslim unity in less than five years,' I told him with joyous conviction.

'Child', he said, with a note of yearning sadness in his voice, 'You are a poet, but you hope too much. It will not come in your lifetime or in mine. But keep your faith and wish if you can.'

"... it was my unique privilege to attend and address the historic session of the Muslim League which met in Lucknow on the 22nd March, 1913, to adopt a new constitution which sounded the keynote of loyal co-operation with the sister community in all matters of national welfare and progress...... I found the world-famous leader of the Indian National Congress .... busy scanning the journals that were full of comments and criticisms of the Muslim League and its new ideals. 'Oh', he cried with outstretched hands when he saw me, 'have you come to tell me that your vision was true!'

"One day in London in 1913, I broached the subject of a delicate mission which I had undertaken on behalf of the London Indian Association, a new student organisation that had been only a few weeks previously founded by Mr. M. A. Jinnah with the active and eager support of Indian students in London. It was their earnest endeavour to provide a permanent centre to focus the scattered student life in London and to build up such staunch traditions of co-operation and fellowship that this young association might eventually grow into a perfect model of the federated India of the future, the India of their dreams; and it was their ardent desire to start on their new mission of service with a word of sympathy and blessing from their incomparable friend and servant of India.

"At first a firm refusal to my request backed by the strict prohibition of his doctors of all undue strain and fatigue somewhat daunted me. But I had a little rashly pledged my word that he would speak, and I redoubled my persuasion." 'You not only defy all laws of health yourself', he grumbled 'but incite me also to disobedience and revolt'. 'Besides', and his eyes flashed for a moment, 'what right had you to pledge your word for me?' 'The right', I told him, 'to demand from you at all costs a message of hope for the young generation.'

" A few days later, on the 2nd August, 1913, he delivered a magnificent inaugural address at Caxton Hall in the presence of a large and enthusiastic audience of students, and set before them the sublime lessons of patriotism and self-sacrifice which he alone so signally, among the men of his generation, was competent to teach with authority and grace".

It was after this speech that, in a private conversation Gokhale uttered words that were an invitation and a challenge to the young woman who was a poetess. He spoke of the pleasure and privilege of service for the country : " Stand here with me with the stars and hills for witness and in their presence consecrate your life and your talent, your song and your speech, your thought and your dream to the Motherland. O Poet, see visions from the hill tops and spread abroad the message of hope to the toilers of the valleys. "

It was after hearing this great man that her mind was made up to serve the cause of the nation. Henceforth she would be a devoted and dedicated Servant of the People!

Her debut on the Congress platform was earlier than that of Mahatma Gandhi — in 1905. That was immediately after the Partition of Bengal when a great civil disobedience movement was launched, and boycott of everything British was in the air. It was in that impassioned atmosphere that she stunned the audience with her eloquence and advocacy of the national cause. Her youthful good looks gave her additional glamour and glory. Ending her speech, she smartly jumped from the dais to join the girl volunteers to sing national songs. That was the time when the Students and Youth Movement was just beginning and she was invited by them to speak in Benaras, Calcutta and Patna. She was the youngest of the great leaders in whose company she was speaking — who were of the eminence of Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Dadabhoy Naoroji, Sir Pherozeshah Mehta and Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya. The youngest among them was the slim and tall young man, M. A. Jinnah whom she was to call at Lucknow, years later, " Ambassador of Hindu-Muslim Unity" while she herself deserved the title infinitely more.

She was the product of the composite Hindu-Muslim culture which she had inherited from her father. In the same year, 1906, at the Indian National Conference, it was typical of her to participate in it only after her amendment substituting "Indian" for "Hindu" was passed. The word "Hindu" was at that time as much accepted by the majority of Indians, as "Muslim" was accepted by the minority. No exclusivism was meant by the one or other nomenclature. But to the sensitive mind of Sarojini Naidu, steeped in a culture and tradition that was itself a composite of the best features of a tolerant Hinduism and a catholic and liberal Islam, only the word " Indian" was acceptable, for she was to become " Mother India ! "

5

GOKHALE TO GANDHI

AS C. P. Ramaswamy Aiyar was to tell Tara Ali Baig when he was 87 years old, a month before his death, "Sarojini's nature demanded a guru. The first influence of profound importance on her life was that of her father; the second that of Gokhale, with his call to service; the third, Jinnah, whose nationalism inspired her to believe that Hindu-Muslim unity was a reality. It was only when she finally capitulated wholly to the call of Gandhiji that she gave herself up with total devotion to him and all he stood for. It went to such a length that she even renounced her rich saris and jewels and started wearing khadi, and this she maintained to the end of her days. Gandhiji's spiritual force was such that, after some struggle, she surrendered completely. She teased him as no one else did, but at the same time recognised his leadership as absolute."*

It was Gokhale who initiated her into the realm of public service. She was a great admirer of his Servants of India Society. His superior intellect, his self-sacrifice for the national cause, appealed to her. She became a young disciple and devotee, while he admired the young woman's oratorical powers, her poetic vision and her absolute sincerity of purpose. Though divided by age, the fascination was mutual. In a letter to Mr. Gokhale she wrote in 1913:

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*SAROJINI NAIDU—Builders of Modern India series, Tara Ali Baig, Publications Division, New Delhi.

"This is just a line to bid you godspeed and wish you speedy recovery. I should like so much to see you before your departure but I trust we should soon meet in Europe as my doctors have ordered me off forthwith. They say I am ill and I suppose I must be. Mr. Jinnah is travelling with you, one of the reasons I believe for his doing so is to discuss freely and fully with you problems that are as dear to him as to you and, if I may add, to me. Please have confidence in my judgment and conviction—about him—and use your great influence to make him realise that he is the man for whom great work is waiting. I believe, if you confer together you will give him the confidence he lacks and you will gain a new hope and a colleague uniformly worth having. *You are the only two men in whom I have faith* and you do me the honour to believe that my woman's instinct and poet's vision help me to foresee—clearly almost to certainty."

She wrote of Gokhale : "It was to me a valuable lesson in human psychology to study the secret of his rich and paradoxical nature with his unrivalled gifts of political analysis and synthesis, his flawless and relentless mastery and use of the consummate logic of co-ordinated facts and figures, his courteous but inexorable candour in opposition, his patient dignity and courage in honourable compromise, the breadth and restraint, the vigour and veracity of his far-reaching statesmanship, the lofty simplicities and sacrifices of his daily life."

Sarojini Naidu was the gift of Gopal Krishna Gokhale, who died on February 19, 1915, but who left behind him an able lieutenant in the personality of the young woman-poet of

Hyderabad whom he had personally trained, over the years, by sending her "notes of warm approval of her speeches and actions and often advice and admonition" for every thing that he thought she had said or done wrong.

Hindu-Muslim Unity was an ideal near to the heart of both master and pupil. It was with Gokhale's blessings that she attended the historic Lucknow session of the Muslim League in which the League, under the spell of her emotional speech calling for Unity, "adopted a new Constitution embodying co-operation with Hindus in all matters of national welfare and progress." Sarojini was, perhaps, the first woman to address the all-male session of the League at a time when purdah was rigorously enforced on Muslim women.

It was in a letter to Gokhale in 1914, that she made the first reference to Mahatma Gandhi who was to shape her destiny, after Gokhale, mentioning that a friend from South Africa had come and seen her in London saying "Mr. Gandhi is the greatest man in Africa. By his magnificent speech he is educating the whole of Africa to finer issues." Gokhale had already met Gandhi in South Africa and been in constant touch with his movement which he perceived to be a part of the national freedom movement. It was he who talked of Gandhi as the coming man of Indian politics and prepared her for continuing her apprenticeship under Mahatma Gandhi.

When, in 1914, she left for India, Gokhale's last words to her were: "I do not think we shall meet again. If you live, remember your life is dedicated to the service of the country. *My work is done.*"

In 1915, Sarojini, aged 35, lost two fathers—Aghorenath Chattopadhyay who was her real father and who had bestowed on her the love of life and liberty and all the values of culture and literature. He died in Calcutta, in his ancestral house, "talking to the end, with his usual vigour, brilliance and challenging charm, on life and death and kindred subjects—"

He died in Calcutta, in his native Bengal where the roots of his life were, but "the mourning in the Mohammadan city of Hyderabad could have been an object lesson to all Indian politicians as to the true meaning of Hindu-Muslim unity; and to that Mohammadan city we are taking back my widowed mother after the *shraddha* ceremony, to live among women who regard her as mother, and the men who loved my father as a father. This is the realisation of the great problem on which the future of India rests. My Brahmin father and mother solved it, by their love and sympathy. This is my supreme pride and solace. Thank God ! And as far as it lies in me, I shall continue the work they began without even knowing that they were achieving great work."*

It was a few days after writing this letter that news reached her that Gokhale, her political-and-intellectual father, had passed away.

Now she was on her own, a mature young woman of 36, who had already established her reputation as an orator and a statesman at the Muslim League session of Lucknow where nationalist newspapers proclaimed her triumph by bold headlines : "LUCK NOW IN LUCKNOW !" In 1916, her real political career may be said to have formally begun when at the Bombay Congress session she was given the honour of moving the main resolution on "self-government." Next year, she moved further up in her political eminence when, at the Calcutta Congress, presided by the *first* woman President—Mrs. Annie Besant—she thundered from the Congress platform : "I am only a woman, (but) I should like to say to you all, when your hour strikes, when you need torch-bearers in the darkness to lead you, when you want standard-bearers to uphold your banner and when you die for want of faith, the womanhood of India will be with you as the holder of your banner, and the sustainer of your strength."

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*A letter of Sarojini Naidu to Gokhale, quoted by Tara Ali Baig in her book.

Sarojini's first meeting with Mahatma Gandhi was also, in a way, through Gokhale. Gokhale had invited Gandhi to return to India from South Africa via London. But when Gandhiji arrived in London, Gokhale was held up for some days in Paris. Sarojini was also there in London, convalescing from her chronic illness. But she was not too ill to trace her *guru's* friend in his East End lodging. "To her, this was a red-letter day, an event which changed the whole course of her life, which took her away from the honeyed drawing rooms of scholars and poets and placed her before a beggar-saint who, from then on with his magnetism, claimed almost her whole attention."*

This is how, later, Sarojini herself described the momentous meeting : "Curiously enough, my first meeting with Mahatma Gandhi took place in London on the eve of the Great European War of 1914. When he arrived fresh from his triumphs in South Africa, where he had initiated his principle of passive resistance and won a victory for his countrymen, who were at the time chiefly indentured labourers, over the redoubtable General Smuts, I had not been able to meet his ship on his arrival. But the next afternoon, I went wandering around in search of his lodging in an obscure part of Kensington and climbed the steep stairs of an old, unfashionable house, to find an open door framing a living picture of a little man with a shaven head, seated on the floor on a black prison blanket and eating a messy meal of squashed tomatoes and olive oil out of a wooden prison bowl. Around him were ranged some battered tins of parched ground-nuts and tasteless biscuits of dried plantain flour. I burst instinctively into happy laughter at this amusing and unexpected vision of a famous leader, whose name had already become a household word in our country. He lifted his eyes and laughed back at me, saying : "Ah you must be Mrs. Naidu ! Who else dare be so irreverent ?" "Come in," he said, "and share my meal."

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*SAROJINI NAIDU — A Biography, Padmini Sen Gupta, Asia Publishing House, Bombay.

"No, thanks," I replied, sniffing, "what an abominable mess it is." In this way and at that instant commenced our friendship, which flowered into real comradeship, and bore fruit in a long, long, loyal discipleship, which never wavered for a single hour through more than thirty years of common service in the cause of India's freedom."

Sarojini Naidu never forgot this first meeting and referred to it again and again. On October 2, 1947, on the occasion of Mahatma Gandhiji's 78th birthday, she again recalled this historic and dramatic meeting and added: "And so, laughingly, we began a friendship that has lasted, grown, developed through all these many years."

The key-phrase is "And so, *laughingly.*"

Henceforward, Sarojini would be court-jester to the Mahatma, the one friend and devotee who was permitted to make the Mahatma laugh, by sometimes making fun of him, sometimes of others, and sometimes of herself!

6

APPRENTICESHIP TO GREATNESS

THE following years were Sarojini's apprenticeship to greatness. Of course, the apprenticeship was under Mahatma Gandhiji's tutelage.

Henceforward, she was to devote less time to her poetry and more time to public affairs—Hindu-Muslim Unity, the problem of *Indentured* Labour, the Home-Rule movement, and the agitation against Rowlatt Bills.

Of course, her response to each of these public affairs was that of a poet and a woman. That was the speciality which characterised all her speeches and political interventions. Her poetic instincts coloured her expression, while the woman's view-point was finding eloquent expression through her speeches.

Hindu-Muslim Unity was, at that time, at its zenith, and Sarojini Naidu was its ablest exponent and protagonist. Thanks to mainly her efforts, Hindus and Muslims were near each other, working together for self-government.

In 1916, Lokamanya Tilak started his Home-Rule League and half a year later, Mrs. Besant's Home-Rule League also started functioning. They were the two parallel wings of the Mahatma's freedom movement. Sarojini's poems reflected the new dynamic and self-assertive mood of the national movement.

It was about this time at the 1916 session of the Indian National Congress at Lucknow, that Jawaharlal Nehru, for the first time, met Sarojini Naidu. He was naturally charmed by her. He was tremendously "moved" by her speeches. "It was all nationalism and patriotism and I was a pure nationalist, my vague socialist ideas of college days having sunk into the background."*

At the same session, she made her famous speech on the Arms Act. Her youngest brother, Harindranath Chattopadhyay, told me that Sarojini Naidu knew precious little about the implications of the Arms Act except that the Indian nationalists demanded arms as a mark of national self-respect. So, when she was asked to speak on the theme, she requested to be placed last in the list of speakers. "She thought," recalls Harin, "that she would pick up some points from the other and, better-prepared, speeches. But the Governor of U. P., Sir James Meston, entered the Congress Pandal when someone else was speaking on the same resolution. So, the President thought of requesting Sarojini Naidu to speak next as a kind of show-piece which would impress the Governor and his lady. The order of precedence was changed and Sarojini was asked to speak. She took the floor and made a telling impression on the Governor and all others by starting her speech with these words: "Your Honour, Mr. President, and *un-armed* citizens of India."

She continued :

"It might seem a kind of paradox that, I, a woman, should be asked to raise her voice on behalf of the disinherited manhood of the country, but it is suitable that I who represent the other sex, that is, the mother of the men whom we wish to make men and not emasculated machines, should raise my voice on behalf of the future mothers of India to demand that the birthright of their sons should be given back to them, so that tomorrow's India may be once more worthy of its yesterday—Who but woman shall raise a voice for you who have not been able, in all these years, to speak for yourselves with any effect ?"

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*AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY, Jawaharlal Nehru.

On the issue of Indentured Labour, she was passionately to wax eloquent as a woman. The Medical Report of the Government of Fiji had been published, in which it was plainly stated : "When one Indentured Indian woman has to serve three hundred men as well as various outsiders, the result as regards syphilis and gonorrhoea cannot be in doubt."

Sarojini Naidu made it as a feminine issue both for the government and the people of India. She said in an Allahabad speech : "I have travelled far, gentlemen, to come to you tonight, only to raise my voice, not for the men, but for the women, for those women whose proudest memory is that Sita would not stand the challenge to her honour but called upon Mother Earth to avenge her."

She travelled throughout the country, passionately rousing the people—specially the women-folk—on this issue of Honour, the proudest possession of an Indian woman. In another speech she said :

> "Let the blood of your hearts blot out the shame that your women have suffered abroad....I feel the dishonour offered to me is the dishonour to my sex. Is national righteousness possible when the men of India sit still and see such crimes ? Is national righteousness possible till every man amongst you becomes a soldier

of the cause, a devotee, a fanatic, everything and anything which means destruction of the wrong and triumph of the right ?"

At last Indentured Labour was formally abolished in 1917, as a War Measure to appease the Indian sentiment, and Sarojini Naidu could congratulate herself on having achieved it, partly due to her campaign.

In 1917, when Mrs. Annie Besant was elected the first woman-President of the Indian National Congress, three distinguished women graced the Congress platform—on Mrs. Besant's right and left sat Sarojini Naidu and the memorable *Bi Ammaan*, the mother of the Ali Brothers, Mohamed Ali and Shaukat Ali. The presence of this triumvirate was a symbol of Hindu-Muslim Unity as well as the dawn of the Era of Women in Indian Politics.

In 1919, she sailed away to England as a member of the deputation of the All-India Home-Rule League. Evidently she went with the blessings of Gandhiji. For, the police reports said :

> "Gandhi reiterated that he was determined at all costs to start *satyagraha* on the 1st July. Gandhi announced that he spent much of his time with Jinnah and Sarojini who were going to England and he gave them certain instructions. The police has information that he had written four letters which Sarojini was to deliver for him in England."

On her return, she joined Gandhiji's *satyagraha* movement, in association with Vithalbhai Patel and the Ali Brothers. Since the death of Tilak, a Tilak Swaraj Fund was being collected and all patriotic-minded Indians were exhorted to donate to this Fund which was to be used to finance the national movement. Before a crowd of lakhs, on the ground of Elphinstone Mills (which belonged to the patriotic Muslim mill-owner, Omar Sobhani), a mammoth fire of foreign cloth took place. Gandhiji himself set fire to a pile of silk, brocade and other kinds of foreign textiles.

By 1924, Sarojini's name was proposed as the President of the Belgaum Congress. Though the Mahatma was eventually persuaded to preside over it, he paid her a rare compliment in *Young India*. Captioned "Sarojini, the Singer" he wrote :

> "Though I believe that I can contribute my humble share in the promotion of Hindu-Muslim unity, in many respects, she can do better. She intimately knows more Mussalmans than I do. She has access to their houses which I cannot pretend to. Added to these qualifications is her sex, which is the strongest qualification in which no man can approach her."

Evidently, there were some reservations about her bold and informal behaviour and speeches that were more passionately eloquent than diplomatically-worded. For, Gandhiji had this to say when her name was proposed for Presidentship:

> "You are unnecessarily worried about Sarojini. She had served India well, and is still doing so, while I have done nothing in particular for her Presidentship. I am convinced that if others who have so far accepted that position were fit for it, she too is fit. Everybody is enamoured of her enthusiasm. I myself bear witness

to her courage. I have noticed nothing wrong about her. But from all this you need not infer that I approve of all that she or anybody else does."

It was evident that, having served her apprenticeship, she was ready to accept the responsibility of national leadership.

But for a month or so she would get tired of her peregrinations, and come back to her home in Hyderabad, to her husband, Major Naidu, to recoup and recover her health and strength. Here, in the familiar comforts of *The Golden Threshold,* ministered and cared for by a loving husband, who fully realised the importance of her work in the cause of the nation, among her pets and her paintings and books, among (above all) her own children, she would seek revival of her dauntless spirit, once again to set forth on her travels and political adventures. *The Golden Threshold* was opening both ways—inward to a home of love and comfort, and *outward* to a world of challenging tasks that awaited her.

7

CONGRESS PRESIDENT

MAHATMA GANDHI was President of the Congress in 1924. He was given the authority to choose his successor and the only name he proposed was that of Sarojini Naidu. That year, at Kanpur, fifteen thousand delegates had gathered. Drums sounded as the Mahatma entered, accompanied by the Nehrus–Motilal and Jawaharlal, the Ali Brothers and Sarojini Naidu. The whole audience gave her a standing ovation as she appeared. To mark the occasion, she was that day dressed in plain and coarse *Khaddar*. *In Woman Behind The Mahatma,* Eleanor Morton and Mrs. Reinhardt recall the occasion :

> "Her once fragile figure had broadened, but she looked handsome, queenly, with her flashing eyes, her fine skin and beautiful dark hair. Accompanying her was her eldest daughter who travelled with her on all tours made with Gandhi. The other daughter was a student in Oxford. Although her husband, Dr. Naidu, was concerned about her heart ailment, she showed no sign of illness."

After introduction by Mahatma Gandhi, she addressed the audience thus :

> "I who have rocked the cradle—I who have sung soft lullabies—I, the emblem of Mother India, am now to kindle the flame of liberty......In electing me chief among you, through a period fraught with grave issues

and fateful decisions, you have reverted to an old tradition and restored to Indian women the classic epoch of our country's history. Mine, as becomes a woman, is a most modest, domestic programme, merely to restore India to her true position as the supreme mistress in her own home, the sole guardian of her own vast resources, and the sole dispenser of her own hospitality. As a loyal daughter of Bharat Mata, therefore, it will be my lowly though difficult task, through the coming year, to set my mother's house in order, to reconcile the tragic quarrels that threaten the integrity of her old joint family life of diverse communities and creeds, and to find an adequate place and purpose and recognition alike for the lowest and the mightiest of her children and foster-children, the guests and the strangers within her gates."

In 1925, after the Congress session, she had a brief respite at her house in Hyderabad. Outside, she was the eminent national figure, "Sarojini Naidu" but in *The Golden Threshold*, she was but the "wife of Major Naidu."

In a letter to Jawaharlal Nehru she wrote :

"My dear Jawahar,

I am writing from *The Golden Threshold*, sitting on my own carved blackwood couch with Ras Taffari, Pavo Nourmi, Nicolo Pissano and Dik Dik Mahjongg—the four-footed rulers of the house, harmoniously stretched all around me, the sun-birds and honey-birds making music in the garden among the flowering Gul Mohurs and scarlet roses...

"Padmaja is in thrills over the new Fiat that has just arrived from Bombay. Govind is praying in his heart while he feeds on a belated lunch of *Baghara Baigan* and *falsa sherbet* that the Exalted One won't spoil his holiday among the rocks and waters of our intended destination...

"In a word, I am at home having my first holiday since 1921, a real holiday with every snake shut out from the paradise in the guise of outside cares, responsibilities and duties. Basely, but bravely, have I deserted my post for a few weeks because my soul needed and cried out for an atmosphere of beauty, burgeoning trees, nesting birds, lyric poets, the children and dogs and old friends and a little leisure from the constructive programme and the self-destruction programme of our so-called politics. I shall return duly to neglected duties and responsibilities but, meanwhile, I wish you could share the delight—the real delight of being in Hyderabad boating on the Mir Alam, or lounging and loafing around and meeting the most truly cosmopolitan society in India which, needless to say, haunts 'The Golden Threshold' even unto four generations, beginning with the smallest, tiniest generation that sits on the floor and shares its cakes with the cat and upsets its *sherbet* on its clothes. Why don't you too go on strike and hide here ? I will ask Shuaib to come on strike too, but I do draw the line at your other colleagues. Lord, save the mark !...

"Au revoir, I send you all my renewed joy of life to share,

Your affectionate sister,
Sarojini."*

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*"Bunch of old letters"

Sri Vidyābharathi Book Centre, Sringeri

This letter is important, not only as it reveals the affectionate concern for Jawaharlal Nehru whom she had adopted as her brother, and whose family had become her family, but also because it epitomises her philosophy of life—to take heavy responsibilities lightly and to take light, little things more seriously, to take interest in the welfare of her own children and to take corresponding interest in her friends' progeny, and to seek renewal and refreshment in her house before setting out to conquer her own country and the world.

Aldous Huxley, who came to India in 1925 and hit the world headlines by declaring that he saw no beauty in the Taj Mahal by moonlight, at least was fascinated by Sarojini Naidu whom he met in Bombay's Taj Mahal Hotel :

> "It has been our good fortune while in Bombay, to meet Sarojini Naidu, the newly elected President of the All-India Congress and a woman who combines in the most remarkable way great intellectual power with charm, sweetness and courageous energy, a wide culture with originality, and earnestness with humour. If all Indian politicians are like Mrs. Naidu, then the country is fortunate indeed."

The Kanpur session of the Indian National Congress was important as the first sign of linguistic agitation that would, later, assume such large proportions, but which the tact and humour of the lady Congress President smoothed over. Motilal Nehru had made a speech in Hindi and this angered the Tamilian delegates, one of whom retorted by speaking in Tamil. English was, then as now, regarded as the safest bet for the South Indians !

The response of the international press was remarkable. To give but an instance, the *New York Times* editorialized that she was the "Joan of Arc to inspire India", she was the first "high-born Brahmin girl to break the strict traditions of veil and caste."

Despite her frail health, she bore the laborious responsibilities of presiding over the stormy sessions, with patient good humour, and, when necessary, she cried out in admonition :

> "We have national, not purely personal, purposes! How shall I kindle the flame which should waken men from slavery ? Why not aspire to crescent honours, splendour, victories as vast as India herself ? There are those amongst us who wish to be but cheap models of the West ! Why are we not Indians—for India ?"

Though she was not a provincialist by any means, and though born of Bengali parents, she did not speak Bengali fluently. Calcutta had a place in her heart, only next to Hyderabad. Whenever the honour of Bengali women was concerned, she jumped to defend it with all vigour and vitality. But Padmini Sen Gupta recalls that, once at a dinner party when a Bengali gentleman said that there was a deplorable dearth of Bengali leaders in the Congress, Sarojini lost her temper and thumped the table so resoundingly that cutlery and glass crashed to the floor and she declaimed, "Forget Bengal, young man, and think of the whole of India. Bengal is not separate, but a part of India."* Surely she would not have endorsed the provincial

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***SAROJINI NAIDU— A Biography, Padmini Sen Gupta, Asia Publishing House, Page 187.**

snobbery which, today, makes of Bengal (specially, in the realm of art and literature) a separate entity, apart from India!

She spent quite some time in Bengal that year to restore peace between the different factions of the Bengal Congress. At the Krishnagar Conference (which was held, curiously but characteristically at that time in the palace of the Maharaja of Krishnagar), she quelled a disturbance in the audience by her usual tact and good sense—and played her favourite role of the peace-maker!

8

WANDERING SINGER

IN 1928, she was deputed by the All India Women's Conference to attend the Pan-Pacific Women's Conference in Honolulu.

Since her visit followed the publication in America of Miss Katherine Mayo's notoriously anti-Indian book, *Mother India,* Gandhiji asked her to visit U. S. A. and Canada and deliver lectures which would help to off-set the pernicious propaganda of Miss Mayo's book—"drain-inspector's report" (as Gandhiji called it!)

Immediately on arrival in New York, she was asked by reporters: "What do you think of Katherine Mayo?" Her taut reply was:"Who is she?" They knew the mettle of the Indian lady. She would not be apologetic, not even defensive. She would be aggressively rude, as the British writer had been rude to her country and to her people.

The New York Times wrote:

> "Mrs. Naidu is a singular combination of personal qualities. As a politician, she can be stern and strategically-minded, issuing ultimatums to the British rulers demanding *Swaraj* for her followers, and leading women's deputations for equal franchise. On the other hand, her songs and poems reveal only love for the beautiful in nature and humanity.
>
> "The time has come," declares Mrs. Naidu, "when the ideas of Indian womanhood shall be set in

letters of fire against a sky that will not blot out the flame."..."let us understand," says this oriental feminist, "that we must be ready to accept a lower standard of goods, if the higher standard becomes incompatible with our true happiness. Neither man nor woman is to be judged by the amount of material goods each or both of them are able to produce, but by the understanding and sympathy they can command in converting these into human goods."

One of her most important speeches delivered in New York's famous International House on Riverside Drive was on "Better Understanding beween India of the Old World and America of the New."

In the course of this speech, she said :

> "Like the founders of your Republic, the Young India of today has proclaimed to the world a Declaration of Independence by which they mean not only political independence of the country from a foreign rule but also social, religious, cultural and moral freedom for the expression of man himself. To this end, the India of today is evoking its ancient *dharma* of renunciation and *ahimsa*, of which that little man Mahatma Gandhi, who physically is so tiny, is yet spiritually the greatest living symbol of our age."

While she was lecturing all over America, her thoughts were with Mahatma Gandhi in India. She wrote to her daughter on the eve of New Year's Day :

> "All this week my thoughts have been in Calcutta... waiting from hour to hour with almost feverish suspense to know what will come forth from the churning of the

> oceans by so many hands...... I wish I could have been there to help the warrior carved of ivory; but the little man was there and he is more than enough everywhere."

She was never a Communist or even a Socialist, but a Humanist, and her heart went out to the Negroes in the slums of Chicago and Narlem in New York. She wrote from Chicago :

> "It breaks my heart to see the helpless, hopeless, silent and patient bitterness and the mental suffering of the educated Negroes...... They are so cultured, so gifted, some of them so beautiful, all of them so infused with earnest and sensitive appreciation of all that is authentic in modern ideas of life...... and yet, there is a bar sinister upon their brow. They are the socially and spiritually outcast children of America."

Her interest in culture in all its manifestations was acute as ever. She wrote to her daughter in India about a "wonderful play *Wings Over Europe*—which touched some deep chords in my heart. It is a story of a young genius that has found a formula to save the world in conflict with the elder generation of smug statesmen, engaged in guiding the destinies of a powerful neighbour and preferring safety, power, prestige in relation to themselves and the country they represent as against the upliftment of the world..... So they shoot him hoping that with his young body, his young idea and thought will also perish...... but in vain! You cannot kill the vision and valour of youth that would save the world...... The boy, facing the Statesman of Downing Street, says, 'I would raise up humanity if only on a cross. I would crown humanity if only with thorns."

She was enormously interested in the children of America, their education and their welfare. Here is the testimony of an American Principal of the Dana Hall Boarding School which Mrs. Naidu had visited and where she talked to the girls :

> "Because she was real herself, because her hands were sensitive enough to feel the glowing coal under the ashes, she blew away from that which was useless and unworthy, and they responded universally to the majestic inspiration of her presence...... Since Madame Naidu's talk I have heard girl after girl say, 'Gandhi seems real to me now and I know what he is trying to do'. It was not only in her actual address that Mrs. Naidu made India and Mahatma Gandhi live to these young people. She was so gracious and so charming and so interested in all our school life that wherever she went she left behind her a trail of pleased and sparkling individuals."

As the unofficial Roving Ambassador to Nationalist India, she could be equally effective when she chose to protest.

At the banquet for seventy nations during a conference for the "Alliance For Peace", she was asked to give "a greeting from the East." She began by asking the abashed audience of statesmen in their starched shirts and their ladies in evening gowns, to search, in the midst of flags of all free nations.

"Where is the flag of India ?" she pointedly reminded them. "What is the use of world peace, when one-fifth of the human race is still in subjection?"

Her ending was as eloquent as her beginning was startling : "Unless they could hang India's banner dyed in the red of her hope, the green of her courage and the white of her faith, among other world symbols of liberty, there could and would be no real peace in the world."

She travelled from coast to coast, lecturing at Universities and Colleges not only in the metropolitan cities, but many intsitutions in the interior of the Northern and Southern States. This was before the era of jet planes, and all her journeys were by rail-road. Once, she wrote to Gandhiji from a running train : "You ofcourse being an expert can wield with equal ease both pen and spinning wheel, in a train. But I, being a novice, moreover a novice with a crippled right arm, regard it as a feat to attempt this letter."

She was enraptured by the natural beauty and grandeur of America, "a vast area that bears testimony to the triumph of man over nature, of his courage, enterprise, endurance, resource, industry and vision that could coax or compel such rich results in such a short period."

The Grand Canyon of the Arizona overawed her— "where time itself has sculptured magnificent temples to the unknown God out of the rocks that are dyed in all the colours of jewels and flowers. Song itself is transmuted into silence and silence is translated into worship in the midst of such awe-inspiring beauty and splendour."

Being a poet, she was impressed by California with its "flowering road and foam-kissed acre." But she was not impervious to the plight of the Indian settlers who, mostly Punjabi Moslems and Sikhs, "worked as day-labourers on their own soil", who, "by recent immigration laws have been deprived of all right to land and citizenship. Sarojini met them and after a long time they had "a wise man" back from home to talk to. She reported to Gandhiji :

> "I have come to the conclusion after all my visits to Africa and America that the status of Indian settlers can *never* be satisfactory anywhere till the status of India is definitely assured among the free nations of the world."

In July 1929, Mahatma Gandhi wrote in *Young India* :

> "The wandering singer has returned home after making many conquests in the West. Time alone will show how lasting is the impression created by her. If the reports received from private sources in America be any criterion, Sarojini Devi's work has left a profound impression on the American mind. From that triumphal tour she has returned none too soon to take her share in solving the many and intricate problems facing us in the country. May she cast over us the spell she was always able so successfully to cast over the Americans."

9

BROTHER – FRIEND

SAROJINI NAIDU not only married outside her caste and community, she also had uninhibited social and personal relations with a variety of men.

Gokhale was, to her, in the position of intellectual and political *guru*, Gandhiji was a father-figure with whom she was permitted certain liberties and licence as a court-jester, Motilal Nehru was "Papaji" to her. But Jawaharlal Nehru ten years younger, was a real friend *and brother* to her. They were almost of the same generation and they had intellectually much in common, though Sarojini did not share Jawahar's interest in Marxism and passion for Socialism.

The first letter to Jawahar in the collection *A Bunch of Old Letters* is dated December 17, 1917, and was sent to congratulate him on the birth of his daughter—Indira, which speaks of her affection for the whole family:

"Dear Jawahar,

I have not one single moment since hearing your good news to sit down and send a word of congratulation to you and Kamala or a blessing for my new niece. I do both now in a half second snatched from a day *filled*—as usual—with engagements. Madras has gone *mad*—O quite mad !—and insists on sending me mad also.

If you are going to Calcutta you will find me at 7, Hungerford Street: so don't fail to look me up. I am sending you a copy of the *Soul of India* which is my contribution to the Montagu bombardment.

Love to all and a kiss to the new soul of India.

Yours affectionately–,
Sarojini Naidu"

While Jawaharlal was in Europe, on October 15, 1926, Sarojini wrote to him :

"I had a wire from Papaji* this morning to say that quite inadvertently he had omitted to write to any of you in time to catch tomorrow's mail and that I was to write and let you know that he was convalescent and rapidly recouping. Others well. Papaji was wonderfully well after his prolonged rest in Mussoorie before he went to Simla. Since then he began to languish—that I think is the right word for it, for mental, even more than physical reasons: the wretched political situation, the internal quarrels, the wholly unworthy and disintegrating moves and counter-moves on the part of men whom he had trusted and worked with besides, of course the strain of his tours. But now I think he is really getting better after the last sharp attack of fever. The elections are bothering him unduly. I think on the whole the situation is not nearly so gloomy for his party as was feared. I shall be glad when the next few weeks are over and there is a relaxing of the purely artificially produced and deliberately sustained tensions—communal, internecine, personal, and all sorts.

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*Pandit Motilal Nehru.

"I hear all sorts of nice rumours about you—things that please me—of your restored *joie de vivre.* I am so glad that you have had such a prolonged vacation from the torpid horrors of Indian life. For you, Europe must have been a fresh revelation of yourself and a real recovery from the ills of the soul. I hope Kamala is progressing. I wonder if she likes the Swiss air and the Swiss people. I am not very fond of Switzerland though I adore the green slopes when they are enamelled with autumn flowers. Indu is a young mademoiselle by now jabbering in French with a real Swiss accent. Betty I hope is enjoying her holiday. Sarup and Ranjit, I am told, have had a superb time. I would, I were away across the seas! I have had a most strenuous time touring and settling quarrels. Just now, I am somewhat ill. Padmaja is very well but Leilamani had a serious operation and is still convalescing. The Hedaj Hajis came back rather fed up. The Maulana is very vocal and verbose against Saud. Shuaib does not seem too happy. He is seriously thinking of doing business in Bombay. Ansari has been more or less a dry nurse to royalty all these months.

"He looks bored stiff—he is imprisoned practically with thermometers and gargles and bandages as his only companions in bondage...

"Umar's death makes Bombay a nightmare to me—poor Umar, royalhearted Umar! I wonder if his unhappy soul has found peace. How he loved you!

"I wonder if you can read my scrawl. My wrist is stiff with pain. '*Main sarapa dard hoon*' to quote Iqbal literally.

"Good Night, dear Jawahar. How I rejoice that you are out of India and that your soul has found its chance to renew its youth and glory and the vision of the Eternal Beauty. My love to the girls—mother and child.

Your loving sister,
Sarojini."

This letter speaks of the cordial family relations that Sarojini had developed with the Nehrus—both father and son. It throws light on the activities of Sarojini's several friends—Shuaib (Qureishi) and (Dr. M. A. Ansari) who are described with friendly warmth, and a certain amount of humour at their expense which suggests informality rather than malice. The references to Jawahar's immediate family are also significant. She is solicitous about Kamala's health and would like to know if she liked "the Swiss air and the Swiss people", while Sarojini herself confesses that she was "not very fond of Switzerland." About adolescent Indu Sarojini thinks, "is a young mademoiselle by now jabbering in French with a real Swiss accent." She doesn't forget to mention Jawahar's sisters—Betty (Hutheesingh) and Sarup (and her husband) Pandit.

For the rest, she reports what she has been doing in India—"touring and settling quarrels."

Public and national matters wholly absorb her in another letter* which she writes on March 13 (year not known) :

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*Photocopy of this letter received for this book through the courtesy of Nehru Memorial Museum, Teen Murti House, New Delhi.

"Dear Jawahar,

Cheerio ! We shall weather the storm bravely and fulfil the advice to let our work be a battle and our peace a victory. I think the idea of a full conference about *Bakr Id* is quite sound and the meeting place should be Allahabad in preference to Nagpur for various reasons. The idea is to have also a joint meeting of Khilafat and Congress Working Committee.

The Nagpur Satyagraha is well organized and the only drawback is that local people do not take part. The Jubbulpore Satyagraha is really more genuine from that point of view and, on a close inquiry, I discovered that Jubbulpore had been badly let down by the very people who had instigated it and also backed it officially by sanctioning a grant of Rs. 15,000 towards it ! However, I have asked them to stop all Satyagraha in connection with the Town Hall by the 20th. In view of the commitments made under the impression that they were acting with the blessing of the old Working Committee, they could not in bare justice be ordered to stop all at once.

Old Rajagopalachari is behaving shockingly and with sundry deviation from the exact 'cross-your-heart' kind of truth !

The Swaraj Party here is about finished and Patel is, I hear, setting up some rival candidates against Swaraj Party candidates ! C. R. Das is making matters pretty desperate by his speeches in the South.

However—let us go on churning the ocean till we do evolve some supreme gift of Harmony—but first let us tide over *Bakr Id* which *Inshallah*,† we shall do !

Love from your loving

Sister Sarojini."

The letters that she wrote to Jawahar from her house—the *Golden Threshold* in Hyderabad—are altogether in a different vein. Here she is at peace, relaxing in familiar and beloved surroundings and she wants her brother and friend also to have some peace and relaxation. From here she talks to him about her children (four of them—Jayasurya, Leilamani, Padmaja and Ranadhira) and about her beloved dogs (also four !)

Her handwriting was almost illegible, as we have seen from the photostats of her letters, and Jawaharlal must have had a hard time deciphering her correspondence. She wrote in one of her letters :

"I wonder if you can read my scrawl. My wrist is stiff with pain. '*Main sarapa dard hoon*' to quote Iqbal literally."

She makes fun of the "Swadeshi" letter paper in a letter written on 29 March, 1938 :

"This was meant to be one legible line of inquiry after your well-being. It has run into an illegible and irrelevant document ! This 100 percent Swadeshi paper is excellent to prove one's patriotic sentiment, but O ! what pain to write upon !"

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†By the grace of God—a Muslim Invocation.

Jawaharlal must have had a hand in arranging her American trip. For on 23.7.26 arrived a telegram addressed to JAWAHARLAL NEHRU ALLAHABAD reading: "KINDLY CABLE FEAKINS HOPE START END SEPTEMBER LECTURE INTERPRETATIONS SOUL INDIA WRITING HIM IN DETAIL LOVE - SAROJINI"

Jawaharlal, meticulous as ever, scrawled the text of the cable which he sent to New York: "FEAKINS, NEW YORK. SAROJINI NAIDU VISITING END SEPTEMBER ARRANGE LECTURES ON INTERPRETATIONS SOUL OF INDIA WRITING JAWAHARLAL NEHRU."

The signed text is dated 23.7.26. Later, the visit seems to have been postponed, as she was to sail away for U. S. A. only in the autumn of 1928.

From America, however, she was not regular in her correspondence with Jawaharlal. She was reporting directly to Gandhiji and her letters were appearing in *Young India*.

Political affairs and personal sentimentalities are very much mixed in some of the characteristic letters, such as this one written from the Taj Mahal Hotel on November 20, 1929:

"Dear Jawaharlal,

This is called the pursuit of friendship under difficulties. Padmaja and I are on the threshold of departure and both of us being vulgarly popular people, we are besieged with miscellaneous 'fellows' of both sexes every moment. Padmaja is terribly excited over her first voyage and her escape from domestic thraldom. I hope the trip is going to give a new turn to her health and spirits. I had to make up my mind very suddenly, almost between two heart-beats, whether I would go or not to Africa. But they are in difficulties and their S.O.S. was urgent...and Padmaja's longing to go to Africa was one of the sub-conscious influences that decided me.

Good-bye, dear Jawaharlal. I am coming back in time for your Congress on the 21st December. Please see that Papa President sends a cable to daughter president by 6th December to Nairobi with a message to be read out at the opening of the Congress.

Au revoir. Padmaja and I send love to all at Anand Bhawan.

Your loving
Sarojini."

That Jawaharlal was consulting Sarojini Naidu in public affairs is apparent from the following letter written on September 7, 1931, from the *Golden Threshold*, when the Civil Liberties Union started by Jawaharlal Nehru (Sarojini Naidu was President) was uppermost in the minds of both :

"Enclosed is my final list. I confess I was rather surprised at Mr. Menon's list which seems very inadequate : but I supposed people had either fallen off or failed to pay their dues and so were not entitled to vote. This is a good list. I wish I could have added four more names but that is not possible.

"Your language pamphlet is a miracle worker. You should see the radiant satisfaction it has produced among the most disgruntled ! Old Maulvi Abul Hakk[1] whose opinion counts for much in Urdu literary circles, to whom I had sent a copy, has since been in conference with Rajen Babu and has returned glowing with satisfaction. This is a fine and most essential step towards the other settlement which is due and will soon come. Could I have a dozen more copies? (V. P. if your office insists and wishes to make money). I want to send some to various places to people who have had discussions with me on this point, in the Punjab and elsewhere.

"I am in very great pain, so I am going to get back to my sofa. My leg is almost crippled with the mysterious pain that one cannot apparently do anything much to help !

"Bebe is not too bright, but it is a temporary phase dependent on the weather ! The damp and some over-exertion have affected her. I am writing to Indu. Much love."

Her insatiable humour is reflected in this letter as well as love and concern for Mahatma Gandhi in a letter written from the "Mahatma's Camp, Calcutta" on November 13, 1937, to Jawaharlal in some jail :

"I am writing from the modern version of the Tower of Babel. The Little Man is sitting unconcernedly eating spinach and boiled marrow while the world ebbs and flows about him breaking into waves of Bengali, Gujarati, English and Hindi. Bidhan and his colleagues are in despair over his stubborn indocility as regards his health. He is really ill—

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[1] Urdu scholar and Secretary, *Anjuman Taraqqi-Urdu*, who was then living in the Nizam's Dominions at Aurangabad.

not only in his brittle bones and thinning blood but in the core of his soul—the most lonely and tragic figure of his time—India's man of destiny on the edge of his own doom...

"To you the other man of destiny, I am sending a birthday greeting——it will not reach you in time because of intervening eyes that must scan your correspondence. I have been watching you these two years with a most poignant sense of your suffering and loneliness, knowing that it cannot be otherwise.

"What shall I wish you for the coming year ? Happiness ? Triumph ? All these things that men hold supremely dear are but secondary things to you—almost incidental. I will wish you, my dear, unflinching faith and unfaltering courage in your *via cruces* that all must tread who seek freedom and hold it more precious than life—not personal freedom but the deliverance of a nation from bondage. Walk steadfastly along that steep and perilous path—if sorrow and pain and loneliness be your portion. Remember Liberty is the ultimate crown of all your sacrifice—but you will not walk alone."

There is an emotional touch about the letter that Sarojini sent to Jawaharlal on his election to the office of the Congress President. She is apparently conscious of the crown of thorns that has been placed on the head of her younger brother-friend. Personal tragedy and love for her brother-friend are both combined in this letter written on December, 9, 1941, from the *Golden Threshold* :

"Your beautiful letter from prison and your even more beautiful statement when you came out were very inspiring and comforting to my troubled spirit. I could not write to you earlier but I hope you have received my wire of welcome (Is it for the Xmas Holidays ?). I have passed through the most tragic three months of my life that has not been wanting in tragedy, but personal sorrow and suffering are after all personal and private. This has been a period of suffering for and with one who has been undergoing the actual long-drawn process of death and yet it has been a period of spiritual growth and inspiration for all of us, relatives, friends and strangers who have been privileged to be with us even to obtain brief glimpses of the heroic girl in her death bed, even *literally* a mummy and only technically alive. Today, I think, I hope, I pray, she is at the end of her poignant journey of pain. Bebe is sitting with her, holding her thin cold hand. Baba, unable to bear the agony of watching her suffering, is sitting outside. I who have been night and day serving her, am writing to you whom I love so dearly because the very act and fact of writing to you brings consolation....Never have I seen the human spirit prove so triumphantly its victory over physical pain—never have I seen such dignity and courtesy as well as courage and endurance in the process of dying. I wish you had met Eva. Even now when she can say a word in the intervals of her breathlessness she says, 'I wish I had seen Jawaharlal. How is he ? Will you write to him? Thank him for enquiring after me !'

"I suppose the President will be convening the Working Committee and the All India Congress Committee shortly. I hope I may be able to attend them. Fateful issues must be decided, but there can only be one decision as you know and I know. No other will be true or loyal to our ideals and the country."

Jawaharlal, generally, reciprocated these feelings but sometimes he appears to be impatient of Sarojini's eloquence. He had great respect and admiration for his elder sister. He would have liked to entrust the most delicate political missions to her. For instance, before eventually he was sent as a delegate to the Brussels Anti-Imperialist Conference, he had suggested in a letter to S. Srinivasa Iyengar on November 26 that the Congress delegation should consist, of these persons *"including Sarojini Naidu* (and) *Shoaib Quraishi."*

But sometimes, he appears to have been impatient of and dissatisfied with Sarojini's eloquence. In his personal diary dated April 30, 1935, he recorded in a "disgusted with everything" mood !

"Sarojini, Nariman etc. were always of the cautious right except when Sarojini's poetical fervour made her say fine nothings."

Despite these minor skirmishes between the two great personalities, they had mutual affection and admiration for each other.

Sarojini took proprietorial interest in "saving" her brother from the demands of the "vegetarian" Congressmen with their whims and fancies—somebody would demand only vegetables, somebody would be on a diet of Nagpur oranges only, some would want curds all the time. When they came to stay at Anand Bhawan, it would be a problem for Jawahar or Kamala, and Sarojini would take upon herself to satisfy all the culinary demands, or to badger their makers with passivity. "My brother is not a cook", she would often say, "he is the prince charming of Indian politics. Don't disturb him with such demands."

Sometimes, she would summon humour to tease Jawaharlal : "Don't be taken in by these pretty young women's interest in Socialism, Jawahar. They have all got their eyes on your handsome looks, not on your ideology."

10

A SMILE AMONG THE SALT PANS!

THE Ultimatum given at the Lahore Congress to the British imperialists having expired, Mahatma Gandhi launched his famous Salt Satyagraha.

The salt tax, being an inequitable burden on the poor Indian tax-payer, was selected for being defied. All over the country, specially along the shore, the salt laws were defied and broken by hundreds of thousands of Satyagrahis. The Mahatma himself led his 72 followers to the Dandi beach and broke the Salt laws and was arrested and imprisoned. Abbas Tyabji, a venerable, white-bearded Muslim, was the second leader and Sarojini Naidu, a woman, was the third.

Asked as to the most memorable event of Sarojini Naidu's life, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, former Socialist leader, and herself a feminist of great renown, besides being Sarojini's sister-in law,+ recalled the drama at the Dharasana Salt Pans where Sarojini led a batch of Satyagrahis, mostly women. There "she made epic history". Leading a batch of Satyagrahis one morning towards the Salt Pans at Dharasana in Gujarat, on the Arabian Sea, she was stopped by a Police force and prevented from proceeding to the sea-shore which was a few yards away, across the white Salt Pans. Calmly, she sat down on a rickety deck-chair that she carried with her, with perfect

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+ She was the first wife of Harindranath Chattopadhyay, the poet brother of Mrs. Naidu.

dignity, the other women squatted on the sands, followed by men Satyagrahis.

It was a battle of endurance—when the irresistible was pitted against the unmovable. Time passed, the sun rose and became fierce, the sands began to get warm, then hotter, till they were unbearable. But the Satyagrahis, led by Sarojini (" gone on in age") would not budge from their position, however uncomfortable it might be. That was the essence of *Satyagraha* — the battle of Truth!

The Satyagrahis were not given even water — nor would their dignity allow them to ask for it from their tormentors. As the morning turned into mid-noon, then afternoon on a mid-summer day, they sat silently, occasionally chanting prayers or raising slogans such as *Inqilab Zinda bad* and *Mahatma Gandhi Ki Jai* or listening to the eloquence and the humorous sallies of their leader, Sarojini Naidu. The leader was smiling at the sea that was just beyond the Police cordon and the Salt Pans. After squatting for 12 hours, as the evening shadows lengthened, they were still squatting there.

There were American and British correspondents, covering the non-violent struggle. An American wrote :

" A dusty road...... filled with nationalists... around a woman who sat in an armchair writing letters or hand-spinning. Facing her and her followers was an equal number of police, armed with sticks and guns....."

Another wrote of:

"the famous Indian poetess, stocky, swarthy, strong-featured, bare-legged, dressed in rough dark homespun robe and sadnals."

A vivid account narrates the series of dramatic events :

" Seeing that they could not proceed, they sat down on the sandy road. It was the middle of summer and a scorching hot day. They were cordoned off by the police and the salt field was fenced in by barbed wire. They were trapped there, without food or water. The young volunteers suffered from intense thirst, and in order to make them suffer more, the police, it was alleged, drove water carts through the rows of parched volunteers without allowing them a drop to quench their intolerable thirst. Sarojini Naidu sat in their midst in a deck-chair. She never stopped smiling or encouraging her army and they were astounded to hear her cheerful remarks and her jokes." ‡

Ultimately the Police, rather than the water-starved Satyagrahis, got exhausted, and started arresting the men and women civil resisters.

A British sergeant approached Mrs. Naidu, touched her arm, and said, " You are under arrest." She laughingly brushed aside his hand, "I will come, but don't touch me." He was made to feel that his hand was dirty and unclean, which had polluted the body of the poetess.

She was taken to Yeravada prison, near Poona, the same jail where the Mahatma was lodged, and sentenced to a term of imprisonment. This was her first jail experience. How she revelled in it! She wrote to "My darling children" :

"You are all so accustomed to my travel stories from all parts of the world —San Francisco or Stockholm, Durban, Oxford, Venice or Budapest — but nothing exceeds in interest or novelty the most recent of my travels...... as a prisoner of war, brought in great secrecy and with almost sumptuous care behind fast-shuttered windows in a special train from Dharasana to Yeravada...... I slept serenely, well-guarded by high police authorities; I fed delicately and, praise the Lord, I was enabled after many days to perform prolonged and delightful ablutions in clean water...... there is a wide yard for me to walk in with young *sariska* and mango trees, *hasunakana* bushes and a bed of *cannas* fed on my bath water... The Garden of Seclusion."

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‡ SAROJINI NAIDU—Padmini Sen Gupta.

Her next letter expands on the theme of the Garden of Seclusion :

"...... lilies in magic profusion make a delight of loveliness. In the twilight they unfurl fresh unstained fringed white banners but in the dawn they become crystal pools of rain-drops and amber honey for flame-breasted honey-birds, purple bees, green dragon-flies and tiny butterflies that look like cassia petals, lark-spur petals and the fragile petals of white poppies."

Mahatma Gandhi later told her that her arrest had been "the most perfect event of the entire campaign" and "of the greatest world-value."

So it was. The arrest of a prominent woman, a poetess, well-known all over the world (specially in England and America) was novel and sensational enough to make big headlines in the Western press.

Thus ended (or began ?) the epic struggle which was both physical and spiritual. It had established the greatness of Sarojini Naidu as a woman of grit and guts, an able lieutenant of Mahatma Gandhi.

11

FROM PRISON TO ROUND TABLE CONFERENCE

THE next scene of the National Drama that was unfolding itself was the Gandhi–Irwin parleys that provoked Winston Churchill, then in opposition, to throw up his hands in horror at the "spectacle of the representative of the King-Emperor parleying with a seditious Naked Fakir on terms of equality."

The drama began in Yeravada Prison with visits of two well-known elderly "Liberal," politicians— Sir Tej Bahadur Sapru and Mr. M. R. Jayakar–shuttling back and forth between Delhi and Poona, carrying messages from the Viceroy to Mahatma Gandhi and from the Mahatma back to the Viceroy. Eventually, the Mahatma and the other members of the Working Committee (including Sarojini Naidu and Jawaharlal Nehru) were released. Mrs. Naidu was not very happy to leave the prison where her "Garden of Seclusion" bloomed with flowers.

But the scene shifted to 1, Darya Ganj, New Delhi, the residence of Doctor Mukhtar Ahmad Ansari, veteran nationalist leader and ex–President of the Congress and a friend of Sarojini Naidu and of Motilal Nehru, who, unfortunately, expired just on the eve of the parleys.

Prolonged parleys were held in Delhi under the tragic shadow of Motilal Nehru's death which affected Jawahar deeply. It was Sarojini's task to console Jawahar and to look after him at this sad hour of bereavement. She was a great friend of Dr. Ansari and he handed over charge of entertaining Mahatma and other Congress leaders to her. It was not an easy and pleasant task. The Mahatma required only goat's milk and some fruits and vegetables. But the others— the *chhote* Mahatmas— wanted all manner of quaint and expensive diets—ranging from Kashmir apples to sweet curds, and other sweetmeats. Jawaharlal, alone, was normal and required nothing special— he ate whatever normally was served in the house to everyone else. But Sarojini took the onerous responsibility in her stride, only sometimes losing her temper at the dietic fads and outlandish demands of the *Chhote* Mahatmas.

That did not prevent her from participating in the deliberations and the discussions of the Working Committee which she wanted to be conciliatory without allowing anything to impair National Honour. But she was prepared for the failure of the talks and all of them going back to jail.

She told Robert Bernays, the British journalist, at that time about her jail experiences. "I had a wonderful time", she told him. "I did not want to come out, I had planted some beautiful *chrysanthemums* and just as they were coming into flower, we were all put out again. I begged the Civil Surgeon to allow me to stay just an extra day to see my flowers but he refused absolutely and I had to turn out." "What do you think of Gandhi— isn't he an ugly little man?'' It was her way of showing her affection for the Mahatma—of whose habit of staying with Birlas, one of the richest men in the country, Sarojini once said that "it takes a millionaireot keep Gandhiji in poverty!"

She was not very "hopeful" about the result of Gandhi-Irwin talks and told Bernays, "I have got my toothbrush already packed for my journey back to prison."[1]

It was her (cattish?) humour that provoked her to sum up the parleys between the two protagonists, Lord Irwin and Gandhiji, as between the toothless *Mahatma* and the armless "*Mahatma*", referring to the popular epithet of "*Toonda Laath*" (The armless Viceroy) by which Lord Irwin was known in India.

The Gandhi-Irwin talks, however, succeeded in a settlement between the Government and the Congress which was not to the liking of Jawaharlal Nehru who expressed his disappointment in his Autobiography :

> "*This is the way the world ends*
> *Not with a bang but a whimper.*" *

Gandhiji was invited to the Round Table Conference which had already been in session in London ineffectively "like playing *Hamlet* without the Prince of Denmark", with a lot of Busybodies and Nobodies expressing loyalist inanities. Now Gandhi would be the sole Congress representative, with Sarojini Naidu as the representative of Indian womanhood.

So they sailed for England— Mahatma Gandhi travelling Deck Class— and Sarojini describes the voyage and her fellow-passengers with her characteristic humour in a letter to her children dated 6th September, 1931, posted from Susu :

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[1] *The Naked Fakir* by Robert Bernays.

* *Autobiography* by Jawaharlal Nehru.

"...The second class is full of young eager-eyed students... But in the first class there are men of eminence and intellect like old Sir Prabhashanker Pattani hiding under his saintly white beard all the garnered statecraft of half a century of dictatorship in Kathiawar States... There is beautiful Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya, the embodied symbol of Hindu culture, tradition and ideals; Pannikar, brilliant, versatile, of extraordinary charm; Neogi, Adviser of the Orissa States, a man of deep knowledge and sound intellectual qualities; K. T. Shah, cantankerous of manner but brilliant and of what incredible range of reading and infallible memory and mental resources; G. D. Birla, with his marigold coloured turban, his agile and incisive intelligence, his far-famed prescience in financial matters, the glamour of his youth, wealth and success. Then, Shuaib, with sombre and semi-tragic, semi-romantic personality; Dr. Rahman, stern, elegant, efficient, courtier and physician in one, .. and soon...a goodly group... which reminds me of my own *bon mot* which no one has enjoyed more than the Little *Daridra Narayan* himself. I said that while the beautiful Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya would represent the symbol of Hindu culture, the only culture the Mahatma would represent would be agriculture !"

Occasionally, with all her love and respect for the Mahatma, she loses patience with what she regards as his impractical and unpredictable decisions. In another letter, she wrote from London :

"I am really bored to tears by the caprices and vagaries of the Little Man. He does not know his own

> mind for three minutes consecutively! With great difficulty I have found and officially established him in a beautiful house overlooking Hyde Park where he can see people, but some kink in the brain makes him cling to the East End to the utter weariness and rebellion of all his staff including the devoted Miraben! The Gandhi craze still persists and grows in the most unexpected quarters. But, on the whole, things have not been arranged to get the maximum amount of benefit out of the visits...I am driven silly by cranks and pseudo-saints and ineffectual angels, all of whom try and fail to organise things well on his behalf....."[1]

Gandhi, in his new role as the Mahatma, was new to Londoners. But Mrs. Naidu was already well-known. In her book, *India Today And Tomorrow,* Margareta Barns describes her :

> "Mrs. Sarojini Naidu, poetess, politician, walking encyclopaedia on everyone's affairs, combining the shrewdness of her years with the vivacity of a young girl. Almost more than any other Indian politician, Mrs. Naidu has the qualites which appeal to English people. While she can laugh with others (not without a pinch of malice), she can also convulse an audience with jokes against herself. There is not the suspicion of any inferiority complex about Sarojini Naidu, and she is impatient and outspoken when she meets this trait in her countrymen. Who will forget her indiscretion at the end of one of the sessions of the conference when she turned to look for Mr.Gandhi and asked "Where is our little Mickey Mouse?" Many will

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1. Letter of Padmaja Naidu, 23rd September, 1931.

remember another occasion when a certain delegate had bored his colleagues almost beyond endurance by a repeat performance of his views in favour of second chambers. 'Why only second chamber?' asked Mrs. Naidu. She was, she said, 'in favour of third, or lethal chambers, for certain politicians.'

She is equally candid in another letter :

> "The Little Man makes his impression everywhere, but it is not of the magnitude one expected ....if he had come to deliver his great spiritual message he would have commanded the world .... but when he discusses the Second Chamber, finance and franchise, he is less than convincing and below the standard of the more ordinary men who know law and constitution.... But apart from all these, I have endless personal engagements, public and private, in the shape of meals, speeches, and general 'whoopee'...."

She was, of course, present at Gandhiji's meeting with Charlie Chaplin about whom Sarojini had to tell the Mahatma because he had never heard about him. She found Chaplin 'very simple, rather shy and quite charming.

A staunch believer in Hindu-Muslim Unity, she reacted very strongly to the parade of communalism at the Conference Table which isolated Mahatma Gandhi. In a letter to her daughter, Padmaja, she wrote :

> "I must be either inhuman or superhuman to have survived the past dreadful week of unceasing and anxious effort, hour in and hour out, to reach some agreement on the communal problem .... to avoid

> exposing our shame to the world. But shame and sorrow, conflict and disunion continue to be our bitter portion. Tonight, there cannot be a sadder or heavier heart in the world than the broken heart of the Little Man of Sorrows who has once again faced defeat because his own countrymen are only fit to be slaves. Where is the use of apportioning blame when all are so blameworthy? But in the last hour those who failed were not the Mussalmans but the Hindus and Sikhs with their fear, mistrust, selfishness."

She characteristically underplays her own contribution to the deliberations when she was most of the time busy arranging behind - the - scene conferences between different groups. She describes her own speech thus :

> "I don't think it was one of my specially good ones. How could one speak in such an atmosphere, but old Colonel Trench came and said, 'Not a single eye remained dry .... and we are supposed to be strong men.' The Lord Chancellor and the Attorney General, Sir John Jowett, Lord Lothian and the others appeared deeply moved but Lord Reading, cunning old Jew that he is, said to me today, 'It was a fine speech; it interested me deeply but you cannot expect me to agree with all of it.' Of course I don't since I asked for the *beau geste* of voluntary abdication."

Thus, the Round Table Conference broke down on the rocks of communalism, and the Mahatma returned to India, a disappointed man and soon went back to prison.

Sarojini was sent, on an urgent mission, to South Africa where she met General Hertzog. the Prime Minister of South Africa.

Beyond giving some consolation to Indian settlers and getting their grievances nullified to some extent, there was little that Sarojini or the Indian delegation could achieve. When she returned, her leader and all her colleagues of the Congress Working Committee were in jail. The kind Lord Irwin was replaced by the ruthless Lord Willingdon and Sarojini became the acting President — virtual dictator of the non-violent national movement then going on.

12

PLAYING MOTHER TO "MICKEY MOUSE"!

WHILE in London for the Round Table Conference, at a function Sarojini Naidu, trying to find out Mahatma Gandhi in a crowd of his admirers, is stated to have asked, "Has someone seen our Mickey Mouse?" Since then the appellation "Mickey Mouse" had stuck to Gandhiji, even if he had never set eyes on the Walt Disney character of the famous Mouse which is — at least *was* — the beloved of world's children.

On her return from South Africa, Sarojini Naidu found herself the virtual dictator of the Indian National Congress. Soon she was in prison. She was conveyed to the Arthur Road "House of Correction" which amused her no end. Mira Ben (Miss Slade), the British Admiral's daughter who was a devoted *cheli* of the Mahatma, and Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay were the other two distinguished A-class prisoners. The matron of the jail was excited in advance with all preparation to receive Sarojini. The "conveniences" which arrived for Sarojini included "a bed, a dressing table with brush and comb, a wash stand, a bath tub, and curtains..... The next day came Sarojini Devi overflowing with vivacity and wit... though exhausted with her aches and pains...... the three or four days were hardly enough to hear all the news, stories and anecdotes."[1]

She was then transferred to the Women's Ward in the Yeravada jail, in Poona, where Mahatma Gandhi was lodged.

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1. *The Spirit's Pilgrimage*. By Mira Ben.

The British Government, taking advantage of the communal bickerings and lack of unity of Indians, had imposed the "Communal Award," with separate electorates not only for Muslims but also for the Untouchables. The Mahatma wrote to the Labour Prime Minister, Ramsay Macdonald, "I have to resist your decision with my life." On September 20, he began his Epic Fast. Now Sarojini Naidu was seen in her new incarnation — as the mother, nurse, and protector of Mahatma Gandhi. The great poet Rabindranath Tagore arrived to comfort Gandhiji and sung hymns from *Gitanjali* for him. At last, after twelve days' fast, Ambedkar was persuaded to come, and agreed to the terms of the Poona Pact by which the leader of the Untouchables endorsed Separate Electorates in return for a promise of the "Hindu" leaders to remove the very curse of untouchability. But soon Gandhiji was to go on another fast to remove untouchability. Sarojini was, all along, free to come or go from the Women's Ward. Whenever Gandhiji went on a fast or was, otherwise, ill, she assumed her self-imposed duties as a guardian. In her book "BAPU", Miss Mary Barr, a Christian Missionary devotee of Gandhiji, gives a revealing description of Sarojini as a guardian-angel :

"I was amazed to see Mrs. Sarojini Naidu, the great poetess and orator, looking out at us from inside, like some magnificent bird of prey protecting her young. The prison guards appeared mild in comparison with her ! A few moments' observation, however, indicated that she was helping the guard to decide which of the numerous visitors could be allowed to see their imprisoned leader, for when Sham Rao's card was presented, Sarojini said : 'You had an interview yesterday. You cannot come again today.'

"But I have someone new with me today and she has come from far to see Bapu," replied Sham Rao, bravely.

"Will she be able to come tomorrow ?"

"Yes."

"Well," concluded Sarojini, "there are too many people today. Bapu cannot do justice to them all, so, come again tomorrow at 10 a. m."

Mary Barr felt then that she "almost hated this super-jailor-prisoner" but later came to acquire great love and respect for the poetess. Then she appreciated the "curious situation in which a woman prisoner was acting as assistant to a jailor in a men's prison!" Next day Sarojini allowed them to have their interview.

When Gandhiji started his third fast for the same cause, the Government, fearing the worst, decided to release him as soon as he started his fast.

> "At 7.30 p.m. three Government officials arrived and called Sarojini Naidu to inform her of the release. She hastened to Gandhiji's cell to give him the glad tidings. She then packed his things and the officials withdrew. Gandhiji conducted prayers with Mahadev Desai, Sardar Patel and Sarojini Naidu and bade good-bye to the first two at 9 p.m.; then the prison gates were opened. Gandhiji left, leaning on Sarojini's shoulders and accompanied by three officials. He was driven in a sedan car to Lady Thackersey's house. She was to be his hostess. †

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† *Sarojini Naidu*—Padmini Sen Gupta, page 255.

During the 21 days ordeal, though Lady Thackersey remained the hostess, it was Sarojini who guarded the Mahatma from others and from himself — lest he should over do the strain which could be fatal in his delicate state of health.

The fast ended, the Mahatma embarked on an epic tour of the whole country to rouse the people against the curse of untouchability and to collect funds for the cause of the Harijans.

In the course of this tour, Gandhiji came to Hyderabad and the *Golden Threshold* opened its portals for its most distinguished guest. Here, Mary Barr again met Gandhiji and came to the conclusion that, even out of prison, whenever she was with the Mahatma, Sarojini continued to guard him — as a mother, nurse and guardian-angel.

13

IN THE CENTRE OF THE STORM

SAROJINI Naidu's role in Indian politics was that of a poet and a peace-maker. She was always called upon to arbitrate whenever irreconcilable differences arose between factions.

But that did not mean that she was averse to, or afraid of, expressing what she regarded as the truth, however unpleasant it might be to some (or most) people.

At a students' conference in Lahore, she pointed out that the introduction of English had been a boon to the people of India, much against the opinion of the *chhote* Mahatmas who were all for Hindi and against the retention of English. "If the Indians were able to project their grievances with a united voice from Peshawar to Cape Comorin, it was because of the common bond of English!"[1]

It was a year of great pronouncements and, Sarojini was much in demand. In March, 1935, she presided over the All-India Music Conference at Delhi where she declared in her presidential address :

> "I am not a musician or a dancer. I am only their poor cousin—a poet. In all my life, things had come to me in tune or picture, in rhythm, colour or form. They did not come in words; words were the secondary

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[1] SAROJINI NAIDU— Builders of Modern India series by Tara Ali Baig.

medium of response. Music and dance made the ultimate expression of the undivided or collective life. Language has barriers and needs interpreters, but music none."

In Bombay, then the cultural as well as the commercial and industrial capital of India, and still the biggest centre of film production, inaugurating the Universal Arts Circle, Sarojini openly deplored the production of a certain type of shoddy commercial cinema, and castigated the tendency in Indian music and architecture, to imitate the Western fashions, and lowering the artistic standards of the country in the eyes of the world.

She emphasized that beauty must be creatively original. Imitation was not art nor beauty. While recognizing the importance of the cinema as a new art form, she deplored the production of so-called mythological films in which legendary figures like Lord Krishna were presented in modern garbs and setting. This she called a travesty of truth as well as art.

At the end of 1935, Sarojini (as President of the Bombay Provincial Congress Committee) unveiled a marble plaque outside a hall which housed the place where, fifty years ago, the first Congress Session was held. The language (English) on the plaque was unmistakably of Sarojini, the Poetess :

> "In this historic hall on December 28, 1885, a band of gallant patriots laid the foundation of the Indian National Congress which during these 50 years has been built up, stone by stone, tier by tier, by the faith and devotion, courage and sacrifice of countless men

and women as the pledge and symbol of the invincible purpose to secure India, their motherland, her legitimate birthright of Swaraj."

In the following year, 1936, tragedy—both personal and national— loomed large. The death in Switzerland of Kamala Nehru, the wife of her adopted brother, Jawaharlal, was a great blow to Sarojini.

Jawaharlal was re-elected Congress President, and presided at the Lucknow Session. He took a new Working Committee including such leftists as Jayaprakash Narayan, Acharya Narendra Deo and Achyut Patwardhan. This was done to balance the Council Entry and Acceptance of Office programme to which Jawaharlal was opposed. "Even (his friend) Sarojini Devi was left out from the Committee" though she was taken back when Jayaprakash Narayan resigned the next year.

Mahatma Gandhi was not even a four-anna member of the Congress now, and he laid emphasis on constructive work which his Ashram, renamed Sevagram, would accomplish. Sarojini Naidu was present at the function.

In 1938 Sarojini spent a good deal of her time in Calcutta, meeting friends and relatives.

On July 17, 1938, Sarojini Naidu opened the Hooghly Jute Mills Workers' Conference at Champdani and advised Labour "not to resort to strikes in a light-hearted manner." Strike should be the last resort and before one started, the workers should make sure they had the strength and resources to carry it through. Moral force was more important than strikes and there should be no reason for strikes at all. Labour should be free of all communal differences and should not possess any Hindu-Moslem prejudices. Employers, she was glad to see, were beginning to realise that workers were also human beings. They needed food, leisure and healthy living conditions, education for their children, and other amenities. Women workers should be given Maternity benefits and *creches*, but there was no point in workers putting forth impossible demands. Congress had been fighting for the freedom of the country for over fifty years. This meant food for all, for Sarojini said: "The first principle of political liberty is that in every level there must be enough food." She asked the labourers to join the Congress in the non-violent struggle. Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose declared the conference open.

Sarojini was no Socialist or Marxist, but the influence of Jawaharlal was evident from her speech as being much advanced than that of the Right Wing Congressmen like Govind Vallabh Pant and Rajaji.

In 1938, she addressed the Convocation of the Allahabad University where her young friend, Amarnath Jha, had become Vice-Chancellor. She said in the course of her address:

> "It is not enough that we should think only of how we have great industries in the country; there must be men working in the seclusion of their laboratories who should be able to sow the seeds of those industries. It is necessary that in the secret recesses where din and strife do not intrude, there must be dreamers and visionaries wrestling with the secrets of nature to discover what new gifts they can give, so that humanity

might be better. Universities, therefore, are the storehouse, the conservatory, the treasure-house, of all true knowledge and inspiration, the teachers must be enchanters. They must be enchanted first and be the stimulus and pattern for knowledge that makes the inspired teacher."

A Congress session was held in February, 1938, under the presidentship of Subhash Chandra Bose, when the atmosphere was changed, with acute dissension over violence and non-violence. Congress was opposed to the Munich Pact and had openly sympathised with the victims of Italy, Abyssinia and with Republican Spain. Much against the wishes of the Mahatma, Subhash Chandra Bose was elected President of the Congress at Tripuri. During the session Subhash Bose continued to be ill and there were many Left-Right discussions and dissensions. The session ended on an inconclusive note. The discussions were carried on to Calcutta where the A. I. C. C., took up the issue. On April 29, Jawaharlal Nehru moved a peace resolution whereby Bose was not to resign but continue with the old Working Committee. At this session, Sarojini Naidu was presiding. She was thrust into the centre of the storm. And, characteristically, she was calm. She conducted the stormy deliberations with tact and understanding, trying to patch up the differences. Sarojini appealed to Subhas in these words :

> "We are all anxious that Mr. Bose should continue as President of the Indian National Congress and lead the destinies of the Congress. We desire to cooperate with him. We desire his cooperation with us. We desire to express that the President of the

> Congress is not a non-entity. He is the true interpreter of the declared policy and progress of the Congress. We shall all give the necessary cooperation to Mr. Bose for the achievement of our goal."

But despite Sarojini's peace-making effort Subhas Bose refused to withdraw his resignation. He "wanted unity of action, and not unity of inaction." In the midst of stormy scenes, Sarojini Devi declared: "I consider this House is competent to elect another President for the remaining period of the year." Thereupon, Babu Rajendra Prasad was elected President amidst cries of "*Mahatma Ki Jai*" and counter-shouts of "Shame, Shame." But she took it in her stride.

During the Divali of 1939, she wrote to her "beloved Jawahar":

> "Your first half century of life has already passed into history, song and legend. May the early years of the next half century bring you the fulfilment of your great dreams and visions and immortalise you in the chronicles of human progress as one of the Supreme Liberators ....
>
> "I cannot wish you the conventional 'good gift.' I do not think that personal happiness, comfort, leisure, wealth and such normal assets of the ordinary man and woman can have much place in your life ... Sorrow, suffering, sacrifice, anguish, strife...Yes, these are the predestined gifts of life for you. You will transmute them somehow into the very substance of ecstasy and

victory—and freedom... You are a man of destiny born to be alone in the midst of crowds, deeply loved and but little understood ...

"May your questing spirit find its goal and realise itself with splendour and beauty.

"This is the benediction of your poet-sister and fellow-seeker, Sarojini Naidu."

14

ON THE EVE OF INDEPENDENCE

BECAUSE of her failing health, Sarojini was released before the expiry of her term. She had to be carried out on a stretcher. Still her heart was in her "Garden of Seclusion" where, variegated and multi–coloured flowers were blooming, because of her attentive care and protection.

When she came out, she read and heard about the famine of Bijapur where the village folk were starving and, some months later, about the much greater famine of Bengal where hundreds of thousands of uprooted humanity died on Calcutta's side-walks. She could not keep quiet at a moment of national crisis. She spoke of the desperate agony of the poor, and she was increasingly certain that

> "the permanent, indeed at present, almost the sole task before us is to try to bring some measure of succour and solace to ameliorate their desperate plight...An enduring national unity can only be built up on the foundation of sincere cooperation in the service of the people."

Being the only Congress leader out of prison, she was foremost in organizing relief for the famine-stricken.

In January, 1944, Sarojini made a speech answering the slanderous allegation that the Congress was pro–Japanese and would welcome the Indian National Army if and when it attacked India :

> "If anybody has the audacity to continue saying it, it will be scurrilous, it will be a lie. I can tell you authoritatively, as the only member of the Working Committe outside jail, that far from being pro-Japanese, we have consistently been against any foreign aggression, no matter what label it may bear. We would be anti-anybody that tried to invade us. There are no two opinions among us on this."

Sarojini went to Lahore to see her sister and was served with a notice not to make any political speeches. On being asked to sign the order, she wrote on the back that she was under doctor's orders not to make any speeches, so the police order was redundant. It was characteristic of her to make fun of Police orders ! From Lahore she went to Calcutta but could not stay long enough. It was then that she heard of the serious illness of her younger son, Ranadheera, who had a collapse following an operation. She rushed back to Hyderabad but could not avert the tragedy. She paid him a rare tribute :

> "(Ranadheera) was such a variously gifted being... he was not a limelight personality at all but a personality that brought light to those he knew. He had a brilliant and constructive mind, a wide culture that was not only gleaned from books but from life — a heart like a golden bow that poured unlimited draughts of affection, compassion and consolation to all in need. He was subtle, generous, courageous, but it was destined that he should die young."

Addressing the All-India Students' Federation in Calcutta, she declared :

"One of the minor tragedies of my life has been the consciousness that the younger generation was pulling itself even with the follies of the older generation. Youth, with all its splendid dreams, all its unlimited powers and opportunities, should be marching forward looking ahead towards the destined goal. They should not be wasting time by looking sideways at each other instead...

"I feel my generation has set so bad an example, so suicidal an example to the younger generation that they are steeped in quarrels, in internecine warfare and communal quarrels, that they quarrel over mere words... why not take the reality of the situation of your own country and the world situation and so create condition of freedom... so that your country will fulfil your dreams of taking its noble place in the International Federation of the world... Those who believe that India is for Indians and none but Indians are betraying the genius of India which has always been universal."

All the leaders were released in the middle of 1945 and the first Simla Conference began by the British Viceroy inviting all the different parties to highlight India's communal problem. The Conference was foredoomed to failure and, despite Sarojini's sincere efforts, the communal problem was not solved. But before the Conference failed, the Labour Party won the General Election in Britain, and the new Prime Minister sent two of his Cabinet colleagues to India.

The second Simla Conference was called in 1944, but suffered the same fate as the first. There were communal disturbances in Bengal and at the end of 1946, when Gandhiji embarked upon his mission of peace to Noakhali, Sarojini wrote to him :

> "This is not a letter, it is an affirmation of love and faith. Beloved pilgrim, setting on your pilgrimage of love and hope, 'Go with God' in the beautiful Spanish phrase. I have no fear for you... only faith in your mission."

The Asian Relations Conference was Jawaharlal's idea to mobilize the anti-imperialist forces of Asia on one platform, but since it was to be a non-political and non-official body, and Jawaharlal Nehru had become Prime Minister in a Congress-League Provisional Government, the invitations had been issued in the name of Sarojini Naidu. All Asian countries and Egypt were invited, with America, U. S. S. R., Britain, Australia and New Zealand as observers. The Conference met in a specially-erected pandal in the historic precincts of the *Purana Qila* (Old Fort). The background of the spacious dais was provided by a large-sized map of Asia including all the countries already liberated, about to be liberated and still to be liberated. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru inaugurated the conference. He said that India had no territorial designs, except the moral intention of "promoting" the freedom of Asian countries and thereby ensuring peace in the world. "We propose to cooperate with all those prepared to cooperate with us."

Then Sarojini Naidu stood up to deliver her presidential address, one of the greatest orations of all times and marking the apex of her brilliant career.

"I am so deeply moved when I behold this marvellous gathering of the nations of Asia, that almost, but only almost, I am stricken dumb. It takes so much to strike a woman dumb (laughter). My brother and leader and the hero of India, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, has said all that could be said, and said it beautifully. I can only paraphrase and re-echo in my own poor manner the great thoughts that he has put into words in welcoming you today...

" I wonder how many of you who have come journeying across steep mountain passes, floating on the vast bosom of many-coloured seas, riding amid the clouds of dawn and darkness, realise that we stand today, here and now, not only in the heart of Asia, but the very core and centre of India's heart...History is in every stone, history sleeps hidden but living in every acre, in every patch of the soil of Hindustan. Kings have walked here, warriors have walked here, where little children are playing today. But today, because it is not the time for children's play, we have summoned you to a great gathering of the nations of Asia to make a great declaration for the future of Asia. We may have our own movements of freedom, but we have come here to take an indestructible pledge of the unity of Asia so that the world in ruin could be redeemed from sorrow, unhappiness, exploitation, misery, poverty, ignorance, disaster and death...

" I bid you welcome so that once more you may remember your ancient greatness and so that you and we, together, may dream a common dream of 'one Asia' and how one Asia can redeem the world. Asia shall not be a country of enemies—Asia shall be a country of fellowship of the world.

" Asia was at the first spring time of the world when the birds sing when the waters smile at the sight of the sun, when flowers blossom and young brides put flowers in their hair, and children make garlands of them, and when you remember all those who have gone before. I bid you, arise from your grave; I bid you, became the bard of eternal springtime; I bid you, arise and say, 'there is no death', there shall be no death for those who move onward, united in a spirit of indefeatable hope and courage...It is part of my creed and tradition, part of my heritage to believe that nothing can die that is good. When my father, who was one of the great men of the world, was about to die, his last words were, 'there is no birth, there is no death, there is only the spirit seeking evolution in higher and higher stages of life'. That is the history of India, that is the history of Asia ! And I bid you, whatever your creed, whatever your faith, whatever your tongue, remember there is no birth, there is no death, we move onward and onward, higher and higher till we attain the stars. Let us move on to the stars. Who will forbid us and say 'halt, thus far and no further' ?...We do not cry for the moon. We pluck it from the skies and wear it upon the diadem of Asia's freedom."

Her concluding address was equally eloquent, and a fitting climax to the ten days of the Conference :

" Today, after many years of dreaming, painfully, I find the beginnings of realisation—in this heart of

Delhi, in this heart of the old Hindu empire, we have founded today a new world brotherhood, not an empire which monopolises power for any one section or another but a federation of free peoples where every individual is equal to everyone else, where there will be no leaders and followers, but all brothers in the mighty task of regeneration."

Gandhiji was unhappy about the plan to divide India over the ashes of bones and hearts burnt in the communal riots. Sarojini was, perhaps, the only person who realized the Mahatma's great unhappiness. When he was on the eve of starting for Bihar where the communal fires were raging, she sent him a message :

" Beloved Pilgrim,

" You are, I learn, setting out once more on your chosen *Via Dolorosa* in Bihar.

" The way of sorrow for you may, indeed, be the way of hope and solace for many millions of suffering human hearts. Blessed be your pilgrimage.

" I am still incredibly weary or I should have attempted to reach the Harijan Colony to bid you farewell.

" But even though I do not see you, you know that my love is always with you—and my faith.

Yours Ammajan
Sarojini."

There is an amusing and memorable reference to her in the proceedings of the Constituent Assembly which had already started its session :

> *The Chairman* (Dr. Sachchidananda Sinha) : I shall now request *Bulbul-e-Hind*, the Nightingale of India, to address the House (laughter and cheers), not in prose but in poetry.
>
> (Mrs. Sarojini Naidu then went up to the rostrum amidst acclamation).
>
> *Mrs. Sarojini Naidu* (Bihar - General) : Mr. Chairman, the manner of your calling me is not constitutional. (Laughter).
>
> *The Chairman* (Dr. Sachchidananda Sinha): Order, order. No reflection on the Chair, please ! (Continued laughter).
>
> *Mrs. Sarojini Naidu :* It reminds me of some lines of the Kashmiri poet who said :
>
> "*Bulbul ko gul mubarak ; gul ko chaman mubarak,*
> *Rangeen-tabiaton ko range sukhan mubarak,*"
>
> and today we are steeped in the rainbow-coloured tints of speeches in praise of my great leader and comrade, Rajendra Prasad. (Cheers). I do not know how even poetic fancy can add yet another tint to the rainbow. So I will be modest, emulating the example of Rajendra Babu himself and confine myself, as a woman should, to purely domestic issues. (Laughter). We have all been taken in the chariot of oratory by our great philosopher, Sir Radhakrishnan, who seems to have evaporated from the scene. (Laughter).

Sir S. Radhakrishnan: No, no, I am here! (Renewed laughter).

Mrs. Sarojini Naidu : He has poured very eloquent wisdom on us. And also all the other speakers representing different provinces, sects, religions and communities.

" I see gaps in this house and my heart is sore because of the absence of those brothers of mine — under the leadership of my old friend Mohamad Ali Jinnah—I am hoping—that my friend Dr. Ambedkar— will soon be among the most emphatic supporters of this Constituent Assembly—and his adherents of many millions will realise that their interests are as safe as the interest of more privileged people. I hope that those who call themselves the original masters of the land, the tribal people, will realise there is no distinction of caste, creed, ancient and modern status, in this Constituent Assembly. I hope the smallest minority in this country will realise that they have a zealous, stern, loving guardian of their interests who will not permit the most powerful in the land to infringe his birthright of equality and equal opportunity in this country.

" I hope also that the Princes of India, among whom I count many of my personal friends, who are so worried, so anxious, so uncertain, so afraid today, will realise that the Constitution of India is a Constitution for the freedom and emancipation of every human being in India, whether he be prince or peasant."

Concluding her speech, she said :

"I have the last word, no doubt, not because I am a woman, but because I am acting today as the hostess of the Indian National Congress who has gladly invited those not within her fold to come and participate with us in framing the Constitution that shall be the immortal charter of India's freedom."

The Governorship of U. P. was first intended for Dr. B. C. Roy but he was in U. S. A. for treatment of his eyes, and was also otherwise, too hesitant to accept the office which carried no political responsibility.

So Sarojini Naidu was persuaded to accept.

" Lucknow would be just the place for you to rest and recuperate " Jawaharlal had argued, but Sarojini was a disciplined soldier of freedom and took up the assignment which was allotted to her.

Sir Francis Wylie, the last British Governor, wrote to her : " I am waiting to hand over charge. When are you coming ? "

She replied in her familiar mock-hnmorous style, "I shall come with a note book and pencil to learn the art of administration from you."

Thus, as the Eve of Independence dawned, Sarojini was the first woman Governor of the largest of India's provinces.

15

A COLD NIGHT FOR THE LAATH SAHEB!

WHEN Sarojini Naidu, went to Lucknow, the whisper went round the hundred and odd servants of the Government House that the "new *laath saheb* is a woman." They felt nervous about serving her, but within a few days she put them at rest. When her dramatist-actor brother, Harindranath Chattopadhyay, came to stay with her, she arranged a musical *soiree* to which she invited not only the local poets and intellectuals of Lucknow, but specially invited all the servants of the Governor's House who, initially, were reluctant to sit on the same carpets as the gentry of their city. Then she asked Harin to sing some simple songs, specially to entertain the servants, and when they heard the *laath saheb's* brother singing in their own dialect, they were reassured and amused.

But this came later. First she surprised all, and alarmed some, by issuing an edict that no western dress was to be worn at the swearing-in ceremony reception at which not only the notables of the province including women, but non-descript poets and intellectuals were also invited. The atmosphere was reminiscent of a princely durbar except that, instead of the dancing girls' entertainment, there were recitations of all scriptures to shower the blessings of all the faiths, in which she equally believed.

Sarojini Naidu's speech on August 15, 1947— the first Freedom Day— was characteristically lyrical :

"Oh. world of free nations, on this day of our freedom we pray for your freedom in the future. Ours has been an epic struggle, covering many years and costing many lives. It has been a struggle, a dramatic struggle. It has been a struggle of heroes, chiefly anonymous in their millions. It has been a struggle of women transformed into strength they worship. It has been a struggle of youth suddenly transformed into power itself and sacrifice and ideals. It has been a struggle of young men and old men, of rich and poor, the literate and the illiterate, the stricken, the outcast, the leper and the saint.

"We are reborn today out of the crucible of our sufferings. Nations of the world, I greet you in the name of India, my mother, my mother whose home has a roof of snow, whose walls are of living seas, whose doors are always open to you."

She, as Governor, carried her moral authority in protecting Uttar Pradesh from the communal holocaust which was then raging in neighbouring Bihar and Punjab. In protecting the life and honour of the Muslim community she was only putting into practice all her ideals of Hindu-Muslim unity that she had preached all her life. She was accessible to any Muslim, however lowly and insignificant, who had any grievance against Hindu officers.

From her swearing-in ceremony, it was known that a new type of Governor— or *Governoress* as she humorously called herself— had come to reside in the mansion of the British *Laath Sahebs* — a patriot, a democrat, but a woman of culture and refinement who held her dignity, despite the fact that much of her staff was retrenched.

> "It was all song, joy and merriment. Her drawing room resembled a Nawabian durbar ; poets, scholars, politicians, students, had free access to it. She regaled them with poems, anecdotes and jokes. For lack of servants, she is even at times said to have swept the floors ; but she never lost her dignity. 'A good Governor must be a good sweeper also!' she exclaimed."*

In a letter to Lady Mountbatten, she wrote :

> "I don't know how long I shall be in these provinces but my one real gift has been having full scope and bearing real fruit— my gift of friendliness. Men and women who have not spoken to each other for years meet under my roof every day in a cordial manner after an initial moment of uncertainty ..... oh yes— the lions and the lambs lie down very pleasantly together in my green pastures."**

I had a special reception at the Government House in 1948. I was in Allahabad in connection with the *Sardarji* case which the U. P. Government had filed against me for writing a "story" (which they called an article) about a communalist Muslim shedding his fear and hatred for the Sikhs when an old Sikh Sardarji saved the honour and life of the Muslim family by giving his own life. But since certain Sikhs had not gone beyond the first few paragraphs, they thought the story to be an anti-sikh article by a communalist Muslim !

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* *Sarojini to Giri.*

** *Mission with Mountbatten*

When I reached Allahabad to defend myself, I found that the local progressive Hindi writers were all mobilized and active in my favour. I was reassured to find that they had organised a Defence Committee and engaged a lawyer on my behalf. But I was rather disturbed to find that two C. I. D. constables were "shadowing" me all the time. I was curious about this surveillance and asked them for an explanation. They were not supposed to tell me but they reluctantly blurted that "*the Laath Saheb*" in Lucknow had ordered "police protection" to be given to Khwaja Ahmad Abbas.

So I went to Lucknow and sought an interview with the Governor, Mrs. Sarojini Naidu, whom I knew from the time I was a reporter in *The Bombay Chronicle*. It took only a telephone call to her Secretary and, I was taken aback when she came herself on the line. "Come to lunch today and bring your story. I want to hear it."

She welcomed and greeted me affectionately, made me sit on the same sofa and then asked me, "Now tell me all about it."

I told her but asked her about the two policemen who were detailed to "protect" me. She explained that a friend of mine had written from Bombay that Abbas's life was in danger, as an infuriated Sikh might stab me. So she ordered the D. I. G., Allahabad, to take steps for my protection. "But why should you have written a story to infuriate the Sikhs?" she asked.

I said, "You hear the story and then decide for yourself."

She called all her Hindi-knowing staff to come and sit on the carpet, and then I proceeded to read the whole story.

She listened in silence but, as it ended, there were tears in her big black eyes. She wiped them with her kerchief and then pronounced her judgment. "The story is good, but the writer is a fool."

I asked why?

She said : "Because of the title, the Sikhs believe it is anti-Sikh— even before reading it or hearing it in full! Change the title— that's all!"

So the story was included in my collection under a new title "The Death of Shaikh Burhanuddin".

I was told by my friend, Ansar Harvani, who was then staying in Lucknow that each and every citizen, however low his social status, could see the Governor. Her Nawabi-style *darbar-e-Aam* was open to all— officials, legislators, poets, writers, musicians, even the lowly *ekka*-drivers, if they had a grievance to ventilate or if they were artistes who wanted to display their art— be they classical singers, poets or craftsmen !

To the eternal regret of Sarojini Naidu, she was not in Delhi when Mahatma Gandhi was assassinated. The life-long companionship was at last ruptured by three bullets imbedded in the Mahatma's chest. She arrived the next morning and found Delhi in tears. She was herself a picture of grief, her face was drawn and haggard— she had not slept a minute in the train— but she did not cry. She realized that someone had to be strong enough to withhold hretears. "What is all this snivelling about?" she asked when she saw people weeping, "Would you rather he died of decrepit old age or indigestion? This was the only death great enough for him." Broadcasting to the nation she said :

"There is no occasion for me to speak today... The voice of the world in many languages has spoken already... Some of us have been so closely associated with him that our lives and his life were an integral part of one another. Some of us are indeed dead in him... Of what avail will be our faith, our loyalty to him, if we dared not believe all is not lost because his body is gone from our midst? The time is over for private sorrow. The time is over for beating of breasts and tearing of hair. The time is here and now to stand up and say, 'We take up the challenge with those who defied Mahatma Gandhi'..."

Gandhiji was ten years older than Sarojini, Jawaharlal was ten years younger.

Sarojini celebrated her 70th birthday in Delhi on 13th February, 1942 and her whole family was there with her. There was her friend, Jawaharlal Nehru, too. That was her farewell to all she loved. She had a premonition of Death.

"Are you going on a trip abroad this year?" Kamala Devi asked her on that occasion.

"No," replied Sarojini, "I am packing up now for a longer journey." And she pointed above, meaning the other world.

She returned to Lucknow on the 15th but she had severe headache on the way. The headache— which was a symptom of hyper-tension— continued to trouble her and her blood pressure rose dangerously. Breathing became difficult. On February 18, Dr. B. C. Roy, her old friend, who had rushed from Calcutta, administered oxygen. But meanwhile, her heart had grown weaker and blood transfusion was given.

March 1. At 10.40 p.m., after a few hours sleep, Sarojini awoke She had, earlier, persuaded her daughter, to go to Allahabad to attend the opening of Begum Azad Ward of the Kamala Nehru Memorial Hospital. So a family friend, Vijay Pathak, was summoned by local telephone. When he arrived she was feeling cold. He remembers her saying, "It is the coldest night of my whole life."

Then she asked her nurse to sing to her and apologised for the trouble she was giving her. The nurse sang an English song and hushed as she saw her distinguished patient lulled to sleep. She woke up again at 2–30 a.m., painfully coughed, then dropped into a coma. She breathed her last at 3–45 a.m. before the doctor could be summoned from the adjoining room.

The news of her death was conveyed by telephone to the Governor-General, Shri Rajagopalachari, the Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, and to Padmaja Naidu who were all at Allahabad. Her husband was also informed by trunk-call to Hyderabad.

Shri Rajagopalachari, Pandit Nehru, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad and Padmaja Naidu flew in by special plane on the morning of March 2.

She was cremated the same day at the time of sunset—the time she loved most and wrote many poems about—against the silhouetted Chhatter Manzil on the banks of the Gomti.

In an emotion-charged speech, Jawaharlal Nehru said :

"Here was a person of great brilliance, here was a person vital and vivid, here was a person with so many gifts which made her perfectly unique. She began life as a poet, in later years when the compulsion of events drew her into the national struggle with all the zest and fire that she possessed... her whole life became a poem and a song, and she did that amazing thing. She infused artistry and poetry into the national struggle, just as the Father of the Nation had infused moral grandeur to it..... We should, no doubt, in generations to come, remember her, but perhaps those who come after us, and those who have not been associated with her so closely, will not realise fully the richness of that personality which could not be easily translated or transmuted into spoken words or records. So she worked for India. She knew how to work and how to play and that was a wonderful combination, and she knew how to sacrifice herself for great causes.... this so gracefully and so graciously that it appeared an easy thing to do and not anything containing travail of spirit-for any sensitive person like her must have suffered great travail of spirit.... She lifted up our struggle into higher planes."

But she had already prepared her own epitaph in verse:

"Farewell, O eager faces that surround me,
Claiming the tender services of my days
Farewell, O joyous spirits that have bound me
With the love-sprinkled garlands of our praise.

"To you what further homage shall I render,
Victorious city gilded by the sea,
Where breaks in surging tide of woe and splendour
The age-long tumult of humanity ?"

16

"AKKA" – THE UNIVERSAL ELDER SISTER!

She was given different names by different people.
She was originally Miss Sarojini Chattopadhyay.
Later she became Mrs. Sarojini Naidu.

By popular acclaim, she was given the title of '*Bulbul-e-Hind*" (Nightingale of India).

She was (once at least, by mistake) dubbed as "Naughty Girl of India."

But the one epithet that stuck to her in personal life was *AKKA* (Telugu for elder sister). It could well apply to her in her public life also. She was the universal *elder sister* to the entire nation.

She was the "elder sister"not only to Jawaharlal Nehru but to the *ekkawala* of Lucknow who would go to her with his grievances against the high-handedness of the Police; she was "*Akka*"to the impecunious poets and progressive writers who went to her with their poems and prose works wanting her to hear them and (hopefully) appreciate them ; she was "*Akka*" to the many men and women Congress volunteers who followed her wherever she went, at Dharasana or at Delhi, wanting her inspiration and encouragement in their thankless and back-breaking chores; she was "*Akka*" to the many fellow-prisoners (not only politicals but ordinary inmates of a prison) as well as the warders and jail matrons, who were destined to be her jailors but who were fortunate to come under her spell.

To Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, Sarojini was the one to whom they could all go with their domestic problems, want for jobs, communal tangles, and were sure of a kindly and ready help....she took their problems to her heart and made them her own—that was 'one of her typical characteristics.'

She also suggests that, possibly, it was this passionate interest in human beings that had cultivated such a prodigious memory in her. "Some remember faces" others names, while the rest have only a lingering sense of association. Not so with Sarojini. She remembered faces, names (not names of individuals but of the whole bunch of individual's family members) and all the associations found round these individuals."

This is also confirmed by Vijay Pathak, veteran freedom fighter and social worker, who was once going along the railway platform at Lucknow in search of a relative of his, when he inadvertantly broke a police cordon round the Governor's saloon. The Governor, being Sarojini Naidu, saw from her window a young man grappling with one of her Police Guards, and recognizing him, sent her orderly to bring him to her.

Finding that the Governor was herself interested in the young man, the Police Guard let him go with the orderly. Vijay Pathak *namaskared* Mrs. Sarojini Naidu whom he knew as an old family friend. But Mrs. Naidu was, first, very severe and strict. "Young man, do you know you could have been injured in the scuffle with the Policeman, besides being locked up for hitting at a policeman-in-uniform?" But then she relented and enquired solicitously about all Vijay Pathak's relatives—his father, his uncles, his aunts and other members of his family. Only when the train was about to start, she let him go. "Next time tell them you want to see me instead of scuffling with them," was her final admonishment.

Shri Sadiq Ali, Governor of Maharashtra and an old Congress junior colleague of Sarojini, says that "we were all sruck with wonder when we heard Sarojini Naidu." He recalls that "we had many eloquent speakers in the twenties and thirties and the forties but the ease with which she spoke and her beauty of language were unrivalled."

" There was no high and low in her presence, not a touch of arrogance about her. She was at home in every company. All felt the warmth of her personality."

Shri Sadiq Ali sums up her personality when he says : "She was an outstanding representative of the composite culture of India."

The secret of Sarojini Naidu's personality as well as popularity was, according to Sadiq Ali, that "she loved life with all its manifestations".

Harindranath Chattopadhyay, her youngest brother, said, when I asked him about her, that "she loved Life because Life loved her." Her love of life extended to trees, plants, flowers and gardens, to pets like dogs and cats or birds to human beings—in all their variety and complexity. But, according to him, she was not an intellectual and her reading was strictly limited to detective stories and “light verses”. This is borne out by Vijay Pathak who, as a young man was once deputed by Jawaharlal to accompany her to book-shops in Allahabad, as she wanted to buy some books. He was surprised when she chose only the novels of Agatha Christie for her reading. (She shared this habit with many other geniuses including Bertrand Russell.) She needed “diversion” for her mind which was involved with serious politics all the time.

Devika Rani Roerich (Dada Phalke Award-winner and the famous film star of yester-years) pays an artist’s tribute to Sarojini Naidu who “was conversant with the Art forms not only of India but of the world” and quoted from her opinion of “KARMA” which Sarojini had seen in London, and about which she wrote :

> “All real art has a universal significance and speaks a universal tongue. The modern art of the silver screen ... overcomes all barriers of divergent customs and cultures... it delivers a single message equally to all races.
>
> “A striking example of this is furnished by ‘Karma’ the first Indian talkie to be presented to the West, which has received such generous recognition in many European countries... It is, in itself, a tribute both to the remarkable courage, vision, patience and resource of Himansu Rai, the producer, and to that lovely gifted little lady, Devika Rani, the heroine, who blossoms like a magical flower of romance out of the heart of the play.”

No two motion pictures could be so dissimilar in content as the lyrical and mystic *Karma* and the ruggedly realistic *Dharti Ke Lal* (Children of the Earth) which I showed to Mrs. Naidu in Simla at the time of the Second Simla Conference. Her reaction to this film of the Bengal famine was emotional—she came out after seeing it in tears and could not speak a word of appreciation. Later she wrote a letter of appreciation to me from her residence.

Shrimati Sumati Morarji recalls that "when she was in Bombay, she used to stay at the Taj Mahal Hotel, where she had a *suite* and most of the evenings I used to go there and sit with her. It used to be a good assembly of important persons including artists, musicians, poets, writers from India as well as abroad. It was a good meeting place to discuss on various subjects — political, cultural and social."

That provided education to the young Sumati.

She also recalls that "when Gandhiji returned to Bombay in 1944 Smt. Sarojini came with him and all were staying with us at Juhu. Smt. Sarojini was occupying a cottage and she acted as Bapu's guardian. All visitors had to meet her before they were allowed to meet Bapuji. I used to amuse her, calling her "Bapu's Jailor."

Ali Mohammed Tariq who, as a young Congress M. P., knew her as a senior leader and then as Governor of U. P., says of her : "She was the greatest secularist our country has known and had the cause of Hindu-Muslim unity at heart."

That is also the opinion of Srinivas Lahoti, Honorary Secretary of the Anjuman Taraqqi-e-Urdu, Hyderabad, who says of her : "She was a secularist and the symbol of the secular, composite culture of Hyderabad which she loved and wanted to hold as a model for a United India. At the time of the Razakar agitation, she lamented 'It is a matter of sorrow that Hyderabad, the cultural *sangam* of India, is committing suicide.' After the successful Police Action she publicly said : "Today I am overwhelmed by mixed sentiments of sorrow and happiness. I am pained that *my* homeland, Hyderabad, had to lay down arms, but at the same time happy that Hyderabad has been saved from great disaster."

Only one who has Sarojini Naidu's great heart can imagine the sorrow that is in those words and the love of the place where she was born.

Let us close this book with what she wrote to her Hyderabad poet friend, Nawab Nizamat Jung:

> "Come look out ... in the highways in the dust and heat along life's common way, all men and women waiting for some divinely gifted man or woman that you may be, to give expression to the ultimate things unuttered .... the pain, the pleasure, the hope, the fear, the faith, the doubt, the courage, the despair, the love, the yearning .... all, all the emotion that human souls know how to feel .... but because they are not poets, cannot voice .... If you would be true to your responsibilities and your privileges, voice not alone your feelings but all human feelings."